

One camp, three refugee groups: challenges for local NGOs

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Local non-governmental organisations in Lebanon's Bourj al-Barajneh camp face challenges in responding to the complex needs of three different refugee groups.

Bourj al-Barajneh refugee camp is located on about 1km² of land close to Beirut's international airport, and is one of twelve official Palestinian camps in Lebanon established following the creation of Israel in 1948. Before the Syrian conflict, it accommodated around 27,000 people, most of whom were Palestinian refugees from Lebanon. By 2017, the arrival of Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria had increased the camp population to 41,000.¹

Bourj al-Barajneh has attracted refugees from Syria because living in the camp is cheaper than living elsewhere in Beirut and some Palestinian refugees from Syria have relatives among the Palestinian refugees from Lebanon in the camp. Like the other Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Bourj al-Barajneh is outside the jurisdiction of the Lebanese authorities which some among those arriving from Syria prefer.

Local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the camp face numerous challenges in providing support to the camp's different groups. The Palestinian refugees from Lebanon resent the deteriorating living conditions caused by the increased population. Conditions were already poor before the arrival of these new groups and the influx of people has only exacerbated these pre-existing problems and created tensions among the population. Storeys have been added to the poorly constructed shelters, some of which are now eight or nine storeys high, without proper foundations, and electricity wires and leaking water pipes intertwine at head height throughout the camp as a result of the networks being extended to reach new inhabitants. Local NGOs have received funding to improve shelters but the overall construction quality, camp infrastructure

and lack of space prevent people being accommodated safely and comfortably.

The tense relationship between the Lebanese authorities and population and the Palestinian refugees from Lebanon has meant that the latter are often in a worse situation than Palestinian refugees elsewhere in the region. They are excluded from most professions so legal work opportunities are limited mainly to the construction and agricultural sectors and refuse collection. Palestinian refugees from Lebanon are prohibited from owning property and their freedom of movement is restricted. Unlike other refugee groups, who come under the mandate of UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, assistance to Palestinians is provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Palestinian refugees from Lebanon have had to rely more heavily than other Palestinian refugees elsewhere in the region on UNRWA because the Lebanese authorities prohibit Palestinians from accessing state services. UNRWA is the main provider of health care and education and is responsible for sewerage systems and refuse collection in all twelve official camps but the lack of state support and the inadequacy of UNRWA services have led to the development of an extensive network of local NGOs operating in the camps.

The differing needs of three refugee groups

The different legal status of the three refugee groups determines their access to assistance. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon continue to access UNRWA and local NGO services, which they now share with Palestinian refugees from Syria. The Syrian refugees receive assistance from UNHCR and local NGOs, and the Lebanese government allows Syrian refugees some access to state services.

Local NGOs must tailor their responses to the needs of the three groups – a difficult task, as it is easier to secure funding for Syrian refugees than for Palestinian refugees from Syria and from Lebanon, and easier to secure funding for Palestinians from Syria than from Lebanon. Inevitably, the unequal access to assistance and the dual UN structure increase tensions among the three groups, each of which believes the other two groups are favoured over their own.

Local NGOs have also found it impossible to meet the needs of all demographic groups, another challenge that pre-dates the Syrian conflict and is now amplified by the arrival of the new refugees. Donors are keen to fund programmes for women and children but less so for the elderly, youth and men. Local NGOs believe that the elderly are not seen by international donors as ‘a good investment’. The regional response plans² emphasise the needs of youth to be positively engaged in their communities, empowered and resilient, but local NGOs have been unable to secure funding for youth-focused programmes. This is particularly problematic in somewhere like Bourj al-Barajneh where, with few employment options, many young people pass the time drinking, smoking and taking drugs, and are vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs and armed groups. Male Palestinian refugees from Lebanon struggle to fulfil their traditional roles as breadwinners because of the restrictions on their right to work. Syrian men have, like Syrian women and children, experienced the trauma of the conflict and the flight from Syria and their right to work is also restricted. Local NGOs report that frustration among the men can manifest itself in domestic violence, which may also lead to wives who suffer abuse then in turn abusing their children. Local NGOs find that efforts to implement gender-based programming, in accordance with the regional response plans, are limited to those supporting women and children.

Each refugee group has a combination of humanitarian and development needs. Although donors are anxious to shift from emergency to development projects, some of these projects are poorly targeted. For

example, donors want to fund local NGOs to support livelihoods by providing vocational training or business advice but inevitably such projects have limited impact because of the restrictions on refugees’ rights to work. Local NGOs are frequently offered funding for workshops to raise awareness about rights rather than funding to meet the basic needs of the camp inhabitants. Disseminating information about rights is important but these activities are being duplicated and for people who are unable, independently, to meet their basic needs, the workshops seem inappropriate and are difficult to justify.

Building on successful projects

Despite these difficulties, local NGOs have some positive experiences. These include the Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP) which have been implemented by numerous organisations throughout Lebanon to integrate children from Syria into mainstream education. The ALP have educational and psychosocial aims: they are designed to help children catch up on missed education, build skills to study independently, and develop coping mechanisms to help them deal with bullying they might encounter because they are behind or new to the school. The ALP have focused on developing the language skills of children from Syria so that they can participate in schools in Lebanon, where the curriculum is often taught in English and French. Elements of the ALP help children to deal with trauma, and support is provided to parents to help them understand how their children have been affected by their experiences and how they can support them. The holistic approach has been praised by the children taking part, by parents and by the implementing staff. However, the ALP are not joined up with other support, and local NGO staff urge that once the children successfully complete the ALP and enter mainstream school, further support should be available to reinforce what they have learned, including ongoing psychosocial support to the children and their families if required. Children inside Bourj al-Barajneh have sought and received support informally from their

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Bourj al-Barajneh refugee camp.

former ALP teachers but a formal extension of the programme would be preferable.

Other projects instigated by local NGOs include cash-for-work schemes designed to promote social cohesion through health and hygiene interventions. For example, Palestinian refugees from Syria and Palestinian refugees from Lebanon have been paid to supplement UNRWA's refuse collection services in Bourj al-Barajneh. As well as clearing the refuse, participants deliver basic health and hygiene messages to households. Feedback from participants has been positive, particularly from the women, who enjoy having an activity outside the home and mixing with other people from the camp, and who find the additional money useful. However, the impact has been limited and sometimes negative. Some Palestinian refugees from Lebanon have been offended by the delivery of the health and hygiene messages because it implies that they are dirty. The camps are noticeably cleaner while the projects are being implemented but because of limited funding they operate for only a few weeks at a time.

Improving international support to local NGOs

Bourj al-Barajneh's situation is not unique. Local NGOs are in the frustrating position of knowing the needs of the camp population but unable to fund activities

to meet those needs. Recommendations for improving targeting of international support include the following:

- local NGOs to be consulted about the needs of the local population so that funding is available for all groups identified as vulnerable and not just for those groups donors prefer to support
- funding to be made available for the host as well as the refugee population
- donors to focus on what is possible: rather than trying to create livelihoods opportunities, it would be better to support livelihoods by covering transport costs, funding the purchase of tools for daily labourers or providing childcare
- international organisations to lobby host governments to respect refugee rights as they are in a stronger position to do so than are local NGOs
- donors to operate at a national level: for example, negotiating employment opportunities for refugees and facilitating their inclusion in the workforce for planned large-scale public works programmes
- social cohesion programmes to allow local NGOs to work with people from all populations and to target those most in need
- funding to enable local NGOs to tailor their programmes to complement national and regional response plans
- successful programmes to be consistently supported and extended if necessary, based on lessons learned.

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1. The population figures collated by Bourj al-Barajneh Popular Committee before the Syrian conflict and in August 2017 include all camp inhabitants and not just the Palestinian refugees from Syria and Palestinian refugees from Lebanon that UNRWA registers.

2. UNHCR's Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017-2018 in Response to the Syria Crisis <http://bit.ly/UNHCR-3RP-2017-2018> and the Government of Lebanon and the United Nations' Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-20 <http://bit.ly/LebCrisisResp-2017-20>