

# Refugees in Lebanon: Aligning Emergency Response and Development



Shared water tank in an informal camp © GVC

In 2015, pS-Eau carried out a study into access to water and sanitation for the current influx of refugees in Lebanon. This article examines the main findings of the study field visits and stakeholder interviews, which were first presented at a workshop held at SIAAP on 14 December 2015 (1).

With Europe currently seeking to restrict the number of refugees entering its borders, it is vital that the support provided to countries neighbouring Syria be stepped up. This support must ensure that the immediate basic needs of people fleeing the conflict are met while also fostering cohesion between the host and refugee communities. With 1.8 million Syrian refugees (2), as a percentage of its population, Lebanon currently has the most refugees in the

world: 30% of people living in Lebanon are refugees. As the conflict in Syria now enters its sixth year, the needs of those who have found refuge in Syria's neighbouring countries remain huge.

Since the conflict began in 2011, the border with Lebanon has remained open and the people fleeing the war see the country as a nearby safe haven. However, the massive influx of refugees is placing unprecedented pressure on public services, such as health and education, electricity, water supply and solid waste management. In addition, the prolonged nature of the conflict is now undermining Lebanese society's resilience and the government's ability to provide an adequate response.

In addition to the refugees from Syria, Lebanon is also home to some 250,000 Palestinian refugees who have been in the country since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Among the refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict, 44,000 are Palestinian, 20,000 are Lebanese who had been living in Syria and 17,000 are from Iraq.

Lebanon has a long history of taking in refugees (3). According to UNRWA, there were 133,186 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon in 1951. Their presence helped fuel instability in the country by rekindling tensions between communities. In the Lebanese public consciousness, the Lebanese Civil War (from 1975 to 1990), although triggered by multiple factors, remains intrinsically linked to the influx of Palestinian refugees.

This troubled past is part of the reason why the Lebanese authorities are so reluctant to officially recognise the status of refugees from Syria (4). Unlike in Turkey and Jordan, there are no 'formal' refugee camps in Lebanon. The Lebanese government's refusal to recognise the status of refugees increases their vulnerability. As they are unable to obtain formal employment, many refugees end up working illegally in poorly-paid jobs. In addition, one month after their arrival, many refugees have still not registered with one of the UNHCR's four registration centres (Beirut, Tripoli, Zahle and Tyre) and thus receive no humanitarian assistance.

## Identifying Needs, Coordinating Aid

In order to ensure a coherent response, mechanisms for coordinating the activities of Lebanese NGOs and 45 international NGOs working in the water supply and sanitation sector have been introduced. Since January 2016, the government has been playing an active role in coordinating aid.

An 'Energy and Water' working group has been set up, which is co-chaired by UNICEF and UNHCR and includes the main sector stakeholders. The main aim of this group is to develop a harmonised approach in order to provide a coordinated response. To this end, the UN agencies are notably mapping all projects and identified needs (5). Meetings are held each month to ensure that the assistance available covers these identified needs and aid is also coordinated by the four Regional Water Establishments (North Lebanon, Beirut

and Mount Lebanon, Bekaa and South Lebanon). Created in 2000, these Regional Water Establishments are responsible for managing water supply, sanitation and irrigation. They suffer from a lack of financial resources and legitimacy that predates the current crisis; however, they are nevertheless now being required to play a key role in coordinating aid. Thus, the water establishments are being provided with capacity-building to help them deal with this new situation. The Regional Water Establishment in Bekaa is already holding monthly meetings with all sector stakeholders and regularly forwards a list of priority needs to NGOs (6).

By fostering dialogue between stakeholders and disseminating information, these coordination mechanisms aim to provide a tailored response to the different situations faced by the refugees on the one hand and host communities on the other.

The challenge of finding an adequate response is made all the more complex by the immense variation in the refugees' types of accommodation. There are three main categories: informal camps, collective and single-family shelters, apartments. An estimated 20% of refugees live in informal camps, most of which are to be found in the governorates of Bekaa and North Lebanon on privately-owned farms. There were already large numbers of Syrian agricultural labourers living in Lebanon before the crisis, often in shelters and tents pitched on farmland. When the crisis began in 2011, their families and members of their village communities left Syria to join them. However, these camps remain relatively small due to the above-mentioned institutional reluctance to recognise refugees.

The NGO Solidarités International is implementing projects to provide the camps' inhabitants with water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. It is building and rehabilitating latrines, showers and water supply systems. Due to the Lebanese government's refusal to recognise these camps, the NGO is only able to install temporary facilities. For example, water is most often obtained from water tanks that are replenished by deliveries from water tankers. Not only is this option costly, there is also little to no quality control.



Shared water tank in an informal camp

These constraints also have an impact on latrine construction and use. As they are only temporary, it is not possible to connect these latrines to septic tanks and so, instead, they have to be emptied once a week. This complex set-up creates severe pollution issues. Due to the lack of sanitation infrastructure, the companies responsible for wastewater collection discharge

this wastewater either into watercourses or into the sea.

## Greater Cooperation between NGOs and Municipalities

Owing the informal nature of the camps, NGOs usually have little contact with Lebanese institutions. Thus, NGOs generally seek agreement from the landowner prior to installing any infrastructure. Landowners giving the go-ahead for a borehole to be drilled to supply water to the camp on their land usually do so on the understanding that the borehole and related equipment is to remain in place after the refugees have left and re-purposed for agricultural use.

However, as the crisis has continued, municipalities and Lebanese NGOs have started to work together more closely. For example, the Lebanese NGO Arcenciel has involved refugee communities in its programme to improve access to basic services for communities in Bekaa. As well as pursuing its primary objective of supporting the agro-food economy, the organisation has also installed water points for use by refugees around its Taanayel farm.

The second type of refugee accommodation consists of collective and single-family shelters (unfinished housing, former shop premises, garages, basements, containers or former factories, etc.). These very different types of shelter have posed a new challenge for NGOs, as it has taken a lot of time and effort to identify them all. The NGOs have thus been relying on the

(1): [www.pseau.org/fr/eau-assainissement-et-refugies-atelierdu-14-decembre-2015](http://www.pseau.org/fr/eau-assainissement-et-refugies-atelierdu-14-decembre-2015)

(2): Source: UNHCR, December 2015

(3): United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

(4): Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention

(5): [http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/working\\_group.php?Page=Country&LocationId=122&Id=6](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/working_group.php?Page=Country&LocationId=122&Id=6)

(6): From 2016, this working group is to be coordinated by the Lebanese government

help of both municipalities and survey teams to identify needs and pockets of vulnerability. These shelters also require specifically tailored responses. From the very outset of the crisis, the NGO Care has focused on meeting the needs of both refugees and vulnerable Lebanese households and has thus implemented housing quality improvement programmes that include a water and sanitation component. In agreement with the landlords, the housing units identified are connected to water points and work is carried out to install or rehabilitate showers and latrines. Agreements are signed between the NGO, landlord and tenants to ensure that the landlord does not increase the rent or try to evict the tenants once the work has been completed. Since the arrival of the latest wave of refugees, the Lebanese people have been hit by the double blow of rent increases and downward pressure on wages. By targeting both refugees and the host population, Care is helping to improve social cohesion. The situation of the refugees has been deteriorating over time. The findings of numerous studies reveal that these refugees are becoming increasingly impoverished and their living conditions are becoming steadily worse. Although 80% of them pay rent, only a very small number of refugees have been able to find work, meaning they are being forced to eat into their savings. Those families who are unable to continue paying high rents end up having to move out of their apartment or shelter and into the informal camps where rents are lower (an average of \$60 per tent). To minimise the risk of tensions between the host population and refugees, the Lebanese NGO Salam has set up committees across the country that bring together Syrian and Lebanese people, who work to promote environmental conservation, good hygiene practices and, more broadly, improved living conditions for refugees.

Five years after the start of the Syrian conflict, there still appears to be no short-term resolution in sight. NGOs are thus gradually moving away from emergency aid and are instead starting to provide development assistance of various types, predominantly focusing on stakeholder capacity-building and improving and rehabilitating water infrastructure.



A water tower built by the NGO PUI\_Akkar

## A National Need for Development

As part of its efforts to help improve the water establishments, the NGO Acted is working with the North Lebanon Regional Water Establishment to map its water supply network. Prior to the reform, water supply was managed by local water committees and offices. The handover of the water schemes to the water establishments has led to numerous disputes. The local water committees have been extremely reluctant to accept what they consider to be a form of recentralisation that undermines their prerogatives (7). The Lebanese people have also protested against this reform over concerns that privatisation of the water service would lead to price increases. As a result of these issues, the North Lebanon Regional Water Establishment is still not yet fully familiar with the water network under its management.

To consolidate Acted's efforts, some of the water establishment's employees are receiving training on mapping techniques. The NGO is also using its water supply network extension and rehabilitation projects to put communication ac-

tion plans in place to strengthen the establishment's legitimacy. The water establishment and NGO have been holding joint information meetings in villages, thereby enabling the establishment to reaffirm its water and sanitation management role. As the majority (80%) of refugees lives within the host community, addressing their water and sanitation needs involves improving the overall condition of the country's infrastructure. The projects being implemented by the NGO Première Urgence Internationale in North Lebanon are based on this approach. In the villages of Aarida and Cheikh Zennad in Akkar province, which is located near the Syrian border and is one of the poorest areas in the country, complete piped water schemes, a borehole and water tower with household connections and individual meters have been installed. The management of these facilities is to be handed over to the North Lebanon Regional Water Establishment.



Hygiene promotion in a refugee camp © GVC

Although the influx of 1.8 million refugees has undoubtedly created additional needs, this crisis also provides an opportunity to improve a sector riddled with long-standing problems. For instance, the Bekaa Regional Water Establishment has long had a very low bill collection rate (35.18%). In addition, there are numerous illegal connections and only 30% of users are registered customers. As a result, the water establishment now finds itself in a difficult financial situation and unable to provide a good quality service. The Italian NGO GVC has launched a pilot project in Zahle to install volumetric meters. A survey was conducted with 10,000 people that included questions on water-related expenditure. At the end of the interviews, the majority of users concluded that there was a need to charge for water in order to improve the service. This pilot project is now due to be rolled out across three of Lebanon's four governorates.

The transition from emergency aid towards development assistance is driving NGOs to forge new partnerships with Lebanese institutions. As outlined above, addressing refugees' needs involves improving the country's infrastructure as whole. Thus, although it poses significant challenges, the Syrian crisis can also be viewed as an opportunity for improving a sector that has been experiencing serious problems for many years.

The NGOs' work to extend and rehabilitate water supply systems is helping address not only the refugees' needs but also the needs of the most vulnerable members of the host community. Through their projects and programmes, NGOs are enhancing the legitimacy of the Regional Water Establishments and thereby helping to expand implementation of the water sector reform nationwide.

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(7): Allès Christèle, Brochier-Puig Joëlle, Entre centralisation et appropriation locale. Une réforme de l'eau sous tension au Liban Nord (Akkar), Etudes rurales 2/2013 (n°192), p. 97-115. URL : [www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-rurales-2013-2-page-97.htm](http://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-rurales-2013-2-page-97.htm)