

RPW Brief: the Double Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 Crisis in Lebanon

August 2020

The Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) Coalition – an initiative between Basmeh and Zeitooneh, AIJEF Act for Human Rights, PAX, 11.11.11. and Upinion – undertakes research and advocacy on protection issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the conditions for safe, voluntary, dignified and informed return inside Syria.

This briefing outlines research findings and key protection concerns that the RPW coalition has noted with regard to the impact of the current economic and COVID-19 crisis in Lebanon, and contains a number of policy recommendations. The briefing builds upon two vulnerability assessments conducted by Basmeh & Zeitooneh in May 2020 (one covering Tripoli and Akkar¹, and a second one covering different low-income neighborhoods of Beirut²), as well as through a nation-wide online survey conducted through the Upinion methodology between 29 June and 23 July 2020³.

Catastrophic consequences of a double crisis

The combined impact of the most severe economic recession that Lebanon has faced since the end of the civil war and the COVID-19

crisis⁴ has had catastrophic consequences for people's livelihoods and food security. This is particularly the case for the most vulnerable groups among Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, and migrant communities. These include youth, daily workers, female-headed households, the elderly and people with special needs. The UN World Food Programme estimates that 83% of Syrian refugees are now living in extreme poverty – indicating a steep rise from the 55% reflected in the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) 2019.⁵ Moreover, the protection space for Syrian refugees has been suppressed consistently over the past months, with a rise in anti-refugee sentiments, the discriminatory implementation of COVID 19-related restrictions by a number of municipalities which unequally targeted Syrian refugee communities⁶, and a return plan announced by the GoL based on the false assumption that conditions in Syria are conducive for safe, voluntary and dignified return. These developments call for immediate action from the Government of Lebanon (GoL) and the international and humanitarian community.

Livelihoods

While the number of people earning an income declined dramatically due to lack of job opportunities

¹ B&Z interviewed a total of 157 households between 12 and 27 May; 104 (66%) of the respondents were from Tripoli T5 and 53 (34%) from Akkar. Respondents include vulnerable beneficiaries of B&Z's activities and randomly selected households and do not necessarily represent a statistically representative sample. All data should thus be interpreted as indicative in nature.

² B&Z interviewed a total of 141 households in Borj Hammoud, Sad Al Boucharieh and Dekwaneh between 17 and 27 May 2020. A total of 54 (38.5%) Lebanese, 79 (56%) Syrians and a sample of migrant workers of 8 (5.5%) from different nationalities (Bangladesh, Iraqi, Jordanian, Ethiopian and Egyptian) were included. Respondents include vulnerable beneficiaries of B&Z's activities and randomly selected households and do not necessarily represent a statistically representative sample. All data should thus be interpreted as indicative in nature.

³ Upinion did a nationwide online survey between 29 June and 23 July with 1084 participants; 647 (59%) are Lebanese and 437 of these (41%) are Syrians and Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS).

⁴ Please click [here](#) for RPW's previous brief about the impact of COVID-19 on Lebanon.

⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vasyr-2019-vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon>.

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>.

and limited access to transportation, the rapid devaluation of the Lebanese pound has resulted in a significant decrease in the value of salaries and people's purchasing power. **Only slightly over half of interviewed respondents in Beirut (78 out of 141, or 55%) and Tripoli/Akkar (82 out of 157, or 52%) reported they or another family member had worked during the 30 days prior to the vulnerability assessment;** 55% of these latter groups earn a maximum of 3 USD a day (under exchange rates at the time of the assessment⁷). Only 4% of respondents reported that more than one family member had worked in the 30 days prior to the survey. A large segment of people do not have the chance to work at all: **Over one third (37%) of people interviewed through the nationwide online survey witnessed the entire disappearance of their income** in the period following 18 March 2020, when the first COVID-19 lockdown measures were implemented; 25% saw a sharp reduction in the value of their income, and 27% already lacked an income prior to 18 March. **Only 4% reported that their income had remained the same since 18 March 2020.**

Food insecurity and basic necessities

As a result of the above, and exacerbated by a rise in food prices⁸ and an anticipated drop in agricultural production (due to the sector's strong dependence on imported inputs), food insecurity is increasing. **1 out of 5 Lebanese and Syrian households surveyed in Beirut and Tripoli/ Akkar reported eating only one meal per day. 658 out of 953 respondents (69%) of the nationwide online survey reported that they mainly need support to**

provide food, followed by support to pay their house rent (628 out of 953, or 66%) and access to healthcare (334 out of 953, or 35%), which is in line with findings from the vulnerability assessments conducted by B&Z. People are forced to resort to different coping strategies such as borrowing (additional) money: approximately half of Lebanese households have incurred or accumulated debt in the last 6 months, a percentage that is even much higher for Syrian refugees. Moreover internet access has significantly deteriorated, in particular among Syrians, of which **only 10% reported to have reliable internet access,** due to the high prices of 3/4G internet and the prioritization of food and other essential bills, and continuous electricity cuts affecting wifi devices⁹.

Access to humanitarian aid and basic assistance

97% of the respondents in Beirut, and 77% of those in Tripoli/ Akkar reported that they have not benefited from assistance distributed by UN agencies or other NGOs over the past 6 months, and none of the respondents are registered with the Lebanese National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP¹⁰). Echoing these findings, **only 27% of all respondents from the nationwide online survey reported they had received food, cash or hygiene assistance** after 18 March 2020, 60% of which only once. Finally, while the Lebanese authorities have been helping vulnerable families in Tripoli and have promised to support the most vulnerable throughout the country, most of this

⁷ <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/04/21/Lebanon-s-acceptance-of-black-market-exchange-rate-angers-small-depositors>.

⁸ A significant increase of 34.1% was observed in the monthly average countrywide food SMEB basket price between September 2019 and January 2020, from LBP 37,700 to LBP 50,551. Since then, prices of most products have risen.

⁹ Based on findings from the B&Z Vulnerability assessments in Beirut and Tripoli/ Akkar.

¹⁰ The objective of the NPTP is to expand the coverage and enhance the social assistance package of the NPTP to Lebanese affected by the Syrian crisis and all Lebanese households under the extreme poverty line.

assistance has not materialized. For example, the Lebanese Armed Forces distributed food baskets to several families in North Lebanon. Although such support is welcomed, it was limited and not sustainable.¹¹ Furthermore, the Lebanese authorities had promised an aid package of 400 000 LBP¹² to families in need during the pandemic, but this assistance never materialized. It should also be noted that the amount promised would not be sufficient to address the needs of the most vulnerable in the current context, given the rapid devaluation of the Lebanese Lira.

Access to education

Respectively **50 and 55% of Syrian respondents in Beirut and Tripoli/Akkar reported that the school-aged children in their households have not attended school over the past 6 months.** The main barriers cited revolve around school closures due to COVID 19-related measures and financial constraints, including unaffordable transportation costs. **17% and 25% of all respondents in Beirut and Tripoli/Akkar respectively, stated that their children are currently forced to work in support of the family,** which is particularly the case in female-headed households. In the nationwide online survey, 1056 respondents were asked whether their school-aged children have the possibility to attend any school sessions or classes (either formal or informal) in an online format given the closure of schools and social distancing measures. **73% of all respondents (and even 79% of Syrian respondents) with school-aged children in their household responded negatively.**

¹¹ Lebanese Army: "Distribution of Aid Packages as part of the Civil - Military Cooperation Program CIMIC in North of Lebanon", <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/distribution-aid-packages-part-civil-%E2%80%93-military-cooperation-program-cimic-north-lebanon-0>.

¹² Human Rights Watch: "Lebanon: Direct COVID-19 Assistance to hardest hit", <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/08/lebanon-direct-covid-19-assistance-hardest-hit>.

¹³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>

Social tensions

63% of respondents in the nationwide online survey indicated that social tensions have increased in their community, mainly because of the financial crisis and the competition for increasingly scarce jobs, and a rise in discrimination. Social tensions are exacerbated by the discriminatory measures targeting Syrian refugees (including curfews for only Syrians) that were taken by several Lebanese municipalities in the past months¹³, and the spread of misinformation about the COVID-19 virus. Moreover, **55% of respondents reported they are either not committed to or not able to practice social distancing** (due to work, living in overcrowded communities or lack of commitment from the community), which may cause additional friction and challenges given the increase in the number of COVID-19 cases.

"Because we were told to forcibly evict the house, at gunpoint, and to change the housing area."

Quote from respondent in nationwide survey, who plans to relocate.

Prospects

Despite the deterioration of the situation in Lebanon, **less than 2% of 436 Syrian and Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) respondents in the nationwide online survey indicated they are planning to return to Syria in the coming 6 months.** Safety and security concerns (e.g. active conflict is still ongoing), personal protection and safety concerns (e.g. respondents and/or family members are

wanted by the Syrian regime, for military service), and **material concerns** (e.g. the lack of livelihood opportunities, the depreciation of the Syrian pound) were mentioned as the top three barriers preventing a safe, dignified and sustainable return. The above concerns have been raised consistently by Syrian refugees in other assessments as well and show no signs of subsiding. **Over two-third (291 out of 430, 67%) of Syrian and PRS respondents reported lacking access to their properties in Syria**, most importantly due to the destruction of their houses, **followed by the occupation of their properties by strangers**. Of the 160 Syrians and PRS that indicated they knew other Syrians that had already returned from Lebanon to Syria, nearly a quarter (24%) reported that they know returnees who were not able to return to their area of choice inside Syria: the two main reasons cited for this include security and/or personal protection issues (23%) and the destruction of their properties (27%).

"Safety and security... We are wanted by the regime, the house is destroyed."

Quote from respondent in nationwide survey, who does not plan on returning.

Recommendations

Funding & Humanitarian Response

1. Donors should **rapidly ensure full funding of relevant humanitarian response plans**, including the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). The budget for the Livelihoods sector in the LCRP, which is currently the lowest budget of all sectors, should be increased to reflect the enormous increase in needs.
2. Donors should **ensure sufficient funding in response to COVID-19 and urgently commit additional 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 (GHRP). In the GHRP, UN agencies and donors should also increase the availability of un-earmarked funds for NGOs. All interventions should be implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner, taking into account the increasing tensions between communities.
3. Donors and the GoL should **rapidly provide funding and support to farming systems though in-kind distributions and technical support**. In the short term, farmers should have improved access to ecologically sustainable seeds and other agricultural inputs, and Cash for Work interventions. On the longer term, the focus should be on reducing dependency on imported inputs and increasing crop value by promoting new sustainable agricultural techniques, developing the local production of agricultural inputs and boosting local farmers' sales, as described in the agroecological principles of the FAO.
4. Donors and the GoL should **support innovative tech-based education solutions**, including increasing people's access to internet devices, to ensure the continuation of educational activities when physical attendance is impossible due to COVID-19 or other crises.
5. Donors and agencies implementing cash distribution interventions should **ensure that the value of cash packages does not get compromised due to the devaluation of the local currency** and bank closures, for instance by paying beneficiaries in cash or providing in-kind support.
6. Donors and the GoL should **ensure that COVID 19-related services, particularly health services, are provided in a non-discriminatory manner** between refugees and host communities. Donors should strictly monitor that any restrictions of movement or curfews due to COVID-19 are imposed in a non-discriminatory manner.
7. Donors should **maintain support to human rights activities, local civil society, and peacebuilding activities**. At a very minimum, any diversion of human rights and peacebuilding funding should only be short-term and temporary in nature, given the important role that such activities can play in the response to COVID-19, as well as to protect against backsliding on important issues during the COVID-19 emergency.

Continued Refugee Protection

8. Donors and the GoL should **commit to the position that Syria is currently not a safe destination of return**; and that any return should be safe, voluntary, dignified and informed, and a personal decision made by the individual refugee involved. Donors should insist that the **UNHCR Protection Thresholds for Refugee Return (February 2018) form the basis of any Lebanese and international return policy** and that UNHCR provides regular reporting on the situation in Syria with regards to the thresholds, including on any backsliding or information gaps.
9. The GoL should **recommit, both in rhetoric and practice, to the principle of non-refoulement** and halt deportations without due process indefinitely.
10. All **humanitarian interventions should be needs-based and not be based on target communities and beneficiaries' sect, religion, or nationality**. The GoL should ensure that the UN and NGOs can operate according to the humanitarian principles and reach all communities in need without additional delays, bureaucratic impediments, or restrictions imposed by the GoL.



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