

Briefing

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Policy pointers

Lebanon's central government should lead coordination of emergency responses at the national level and support the involvement of municipalities in local and regional coordination frameworks.

Humanitarian actors should make a far greater effort to coordinate with local authorities, including municipalities and Unions of Municipalities, at the onset of crises and as emergencies unfold over the longer-term.

The central government and humanitarian agencies should promote medium- and long-term programmes through the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan to ensure greater coordination.

Humanitarian and aid organisations can better facilitate coordination across affected sectors within a defined geography by adopting area-based, spatial approaches, especially when addressing protracted crises in urban contexts.

Enhanced local coordination for effective aid provision: the case of Lebanon

Lebanon's refugee crisis has highlighted the need for much closer coordination among the various organisations and local authorities involved in the response. A new study¹ has laid the groundwork for a series of recommendations, set out in this briefing, on how national, local and international humanitarian actors can work together more effectively to enhance urban refugee responses in Lebanon and perhaps in other countries. In the context of a protracted urban crisis, this briefing argues that humanitarians will only be able to ensure their responses are sustainable and meet needs on the ground if they work closely with local authorities.

The response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon faced many challenges in the first two years, in particular the lack of a solid national strategy and the very limited capacity of local government to cope with a large-scale crisis. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies took the initial lead. Local authorities, who were at the forefront of meeting the needs of refugees arriving on their doorsteps, lacked the necessary capacity to mount a systematic response. The humanitarian response suffered overall from weak coordination between international actors, the central government, and formal and informal local authorities, resulting in the inequitable and uneven distribution of aid.

This briefing proposes a new framework for collaboration based on a qualitative analysis of the coordination mechanisms used by various actors, with a special focus on two case studies: the diverse and largely urban district of Bourj

Hammoud, one of the main commercial hubs of Greater Beirut; and the peri-urban coastal region of Sahel El Zahrani, located between Sidon and Tyr.

Challenges to coordination in Lebanon

In Lebanon, moves to establish successful coordination mechanisms between national and local authorities on the one hand, and aid agencies on the other, face both political and logistical challenges. Funding constraints and limited programme timeframes mean international humanitarian organisations find it difficult to maintain a continuous long-term relationship with local municipalities and Unions of Municipalities. Furthermore, international agencies often opt to bypass local authorities while implementing projects in order to avoid local bureaucracy and reduce the risk that their aid will be politicised.

It is crucial that humanitarian agencies integrate local authorities into their responses

Both local and international actors would benefit from establishing mechanisms to coordinate the delivery of emergency services. From the local authorities' perspective, these mechanisms

could help them to turn humanitarian aid into an opportunity rather than run the risk of financial and political dependency or being marginalised by international actors. Such agreements would also enhance municipalities' capacity to select and

manage foreign aid based on long-term planning considerations and provide an opportunity to model the advantages of greater domestic coordination for the Lebanese government as a whole.

International humanitarian agencies and local authorities can coordinate most successfully if they share a common understanding of what needs to be done to help refugees. However, arriving at such an understanding requires the kind of dialogue between local institutions and local communities that remains challenging in Lebanon, where decision making is often highly politicised and there tends to be a lack of inclusive, bottom-up consultation.

Towards stronger coordination with local authorities

As the Syrian refugee crisis lengthened, the Lebanese government became increasingly involved in the response and eventually, in 2015, led the development of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) jointly with UN agencies. However, there is still a need to revisit the coordination and collaboration mechanisms established under this initiative, in particular because the incentives for aid organisations to cooperate remain contingent on other factors, such as individual donor agendas.

The limited capacity of Lebanon's central government to respond to emergencies means that municipalities take up much of the burden of catering to refugees, despite lacking the financial and administrative resources to do so. It is therefore crucial that humanitarian agencies both integrate local authorities into their responses and provide them with the necessary support to enable them to manage aid delivery and take responsibility for coordination. In doing so, humanitarian responses can present opportunities to reinforce local governance² by fostering greater local participation in existing structures and establishing new coordination mechanisms at local and national levels.

Humanitarian agencies should also consider directing their crisis support to Unions of Municipalities rather than focusing purely on individual municipalities. The case study of the Union of Municipalities of Sahel el Zahrani has shown how building the Union's capacity through the establishment of a Regional Technical Office (RTO)³ has fostered stronger and more efficient coordination between local authorities and international organisations during the response. Supporting these larger Unions has the additional advantage of facilitating delivery on a regional scale and reducing the risk that an influx of aid will empower certain municipalities at the expense of marginalising others. Humanitarian agencies should therefore adopt a multi-scalar approach in their support for local government to maximise their chances of ensuring that the most vulnerable communities receive sustainable support.

In the long run, any failure to forge a broader national consensus on the way aid is managed will have political costs. However, arriving at such a consensus is not always easy, especially for a central government deemed to be weak or absent,⁴ and there can be no one-size-fits-all strategy for devolving responsibility for collaborating with the international humanitarian apparatus. Aid agencies should therefore work with local communities, local municipalities and local humanitarian actors to establish enduring coordination mechanisms that can facilitate a more systematic and collaborative approach to risk management in response to local and regional crises. Such mechanisms would allow local actors to choose international aid and funding options based on clearly identified needs and long-term visions. Local authorities could then help humanitarian agencies to tailor their support more precisely, rather than relying on preconceived plans that may not meet local needs.

From short-term humanitarian aid to long-term development programmes

UN agencies and INGOs are increasingly adapting short-term relief programmes into longer-term development projects, thereby extending their mandates beyond the emergency phase of a crisis. In a country like Lebanon, where the lines between emergency and non-emergency have long been blurred,⁵ these longer mandates can help agencies ensure their interventions are able to respond to protracted crises. In this evolving context, the division of roles and responsibilities between INGOs and local NGOs is often unclear. Given the present proliferation of actors, establishing a more

clear-cut role for each of them and establishing stronger coordination mechanisms would significantly boost the effectiveness of the collective response.

The shifting timeframes for humanitarian programmes also pose challenges in terms of sustainability, especially when short-term emergency relief programmes morph into long-term development projects, and vice versa, in response to a new crisis. Such shifts often entail changes in priorities, activities and target communities, depending on the nature of the emergency. Given the fluid nature of prolonged emergencies, short-term and long-term coordination mechanisms can start to overlap or even come into conflict, making programmes more difficult to define and implement.

Recommendations for more effective coordination

The challenges that hindered coordination during the urban refugee crisis in Lebanon point to a number of steps that could be taken to achieve a more sustainable and efficient response:

1. A more effective role for central government. The central government should enhance coordination with and support to local municipalities in times of crisis, as well as in the aftermath. This would help to reverse the current abdication of responsibility by state institutions, which tend to rely on aid agencies and municipalities to respond to emergencies due to their own lack of capacity. Moreover, there is a need for greater financial transparency in the government's annual process of redistributing revenues to both individual municipalities and Unions of Municipalities.

2. A focus shift from emergency relief to medium- and long-term programmes. The protracted nature of the Syrian crisis and the uncertain timeframe for the eventual return of refugees requires a shift in focus from the rapid implementation of short-term relief interventions to the planning of medium- and long-term programmes and activities. Such programmes must be planned and coordinated at both the national (sector ministries) and local (municipal) level.

3. Enhance coordination at the local level. Local authorities must be involved in coordination frameworks and their representatives should attend high-level meetings between humanitarian agencies. While it would be impractical to involve all potentially relevant members of municipalities in such meetings, specific criteria could be used to ensure the presence of key representatives,

such as the mayors of the municipalities most affected by a crisis. In addition, humanitarian agencies and national authorities should aim to bridge the gap between high-level decision making and implementation on the ground through strengthened local coordination.

4. Listen to the most affected. Innovative coordination mechanisms that take into account the views of both refugees and host communities should be established to ensure programmes efficiently address their respective needs. Humanitarian agencies should leverage existing, informal local-level coordination mechanisms by integrating them into their response.

5. Build on sectoral approaches with spatial approaches. Sectoral responses to refugee crises should be complemented with area-based approaches (see Box 1). In terms of implementation, area-based approaches could tap into existing coordination mechanisms – including those operating at the level of Unions of Municipalities and municipalities – and then leverage them to promote the long-term development of the area as a whole. Local

Box 1 Complementing sectoral approaches with area-based spatial approaches

UN agencies have organised their interventions in Lebanon essentially along specialised sectoral lines, including shelter; food security; protection; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); basic assistance; education; livelihoods; and social stability and health. Regional coordination has come later. This sectoral approach to some extent mirrored the government's organisation of service provision, with various international organisations and UN agencies joining forces to coordinate interventions to target separate sectors. Moreover, in the early stages of the crisis, international and UN agencies initially targeted Syrian refugees, in accordance with the humanitarian principle of the immediate alleviation of suffering following displacement. The needs of local host communities, who suffered from similar financial hardships and social vulnerability, initially remained unaddressed. The resulting tensions between refugees and host communities — which in the case of Bourj Hammoud, for example, created particularly complex political and social dynamics — prompted aid agencies in Lebanon to make serious efforts to develop programmes to help the most vulnerable communities regardless of nationality.

This sectoral approach was necessary in responding to the urgent needs of a large population at the outbreak of the crisis. However, as the crisis developed, the approach proved insufficient to provide a sustainable response. In a protracted refugee crisis, it is necessary to complement sectoral approaches with area-based, spatial approaches that allow humanitarian and development programmes to discern priorities and address the needs of refugees and local communities in a more efficient and sustainable manner. Such area-based approaches can help facilitate a more integrated, multi-sectoral response and avoid the 'compartmentalisation' of society that can occur as an unintended consequence of ethnic-based service provision.

committees can play a key role in ensuring that interventions provide an optimal, sustainable response that meets the needs of various social groups.

6. Strengthen regional coordination. Since the majority of municipalities in Lebanon are fairly small, INGOs and UN agencies should strengthen coordination with Unions of Municipalities. Moreover, all actors should perceive international aid and coordination with local government as opportunities for mutual learning as well as for enhancing the response to a particular crisis. By directing their support to Unions, international agencies can reduce the risk of increasing the relative power of certain municipalities at the expense of marginalising others. That said, all actors should adopt a multi-scalar model of support for local governance to allow them to tailor international and local practices to the specific features of targeted districts.

7. Respond to urban challenges. Lebanon represents an example of a high concentration of refugees in urban settings. Yet programmes do not tend to be focused on urban areas, nor are they adequately adapted to respond to the

demands of urban contexts. It is important to raise awareness and develop the necessary tools and coordination mechanisms to optimally address the needs of refugees in urban contexts, especially since more refugees are settling in urban areas worldwide.

8. Knowledge sharing should be horizontal.

Knowledge should be shared horizontally rather than solely through a hierarchical relationship in which international agencies enjoy a monopoly on administrative authority and technical knowhow. This broader diffusion of expertise would address the primary concern of this briefing, that is, not merely assessing the degree of coordination, but rather analysing the qualitative relationship between different aid actors and local authorities and how to leverage the knowledge of both parties to achieve a better response.

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Knowledge Products

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The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. It aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy-relevant research in the Arab region.

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Notes

¹ This briefing is based on the working paper, 'Responding to the Syrian crisis in Lebanon: collaboration between aid agencies and local governance structures'. The study involved a thorough desk review, 30 informant interviews with ministries, local authorities, international organisations and UN agencies, and local non-governmental organisations, and four focus group discussions in the areas of Sahel El Zahrani and Bourj Hammoud. A draft of this briefing was reviewed at the Validation Workshop in June 2016, where it was discussed by 20 experts and representatives of ministries, local authorities (such as mayors and deputy mayors), international organisations and UN agencies, local non-governmental organisations and academics. / ² Hubbard, P *et al.* (2002) *Thinking geographically: Space, theory and contemporary human geography*. Continuum, London and New York. / ³ RTOs are units operating under the mandate of the Union of Municipalities, and consist of motivated local experts and technicians. They aim to mobilise public servants and civil society to collectively address local needs based on the available resources. RTOs were first established in 2006 in the areas of Tyre, Bint Jbeil and Jabal Amel in response to the Israeli war on Lebanon. As the model proved efficient for emergency responses and planning, RTOs were also established in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis in other localities, one of which is the Union of Municipalities of Sahel el Zahrani. / ⁴ Mouawad, J (2015) *The Negotiated State: State-Society Relations in Lebanon*. PhD Thesis. SOAS, University of London. / ⁵ Calhoun, C (2004) 'A world of emergencies: fear, intervention and the limits of cosmopolitan order'. 35th Annual Sorokin Lecture, University of Saskatchewan, 4 March 2004.