

The international aid community and local actors: Experiences and testimonies from the ground

Leila Zakharia, Sonya Knox

Abstract

Lebanon has now witnessed over three years of UN-led refugee relief mechanisms targeting the growing Syrian refugee population. Despite Lebanon's long history of local and civil society responses to a variety of complex emergencies, the relief, recovery and development work undertaken by Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) is mainly overlooked by the international humanitarian community, and their insights and suggestions ignored. The NGOs and CBOs' experiences, concerns and recommendations were collected through informal interviews with five local NGOs and CBOs, representing work with the Syrian refugee communities across Lebanon. This report contends that local actors are better positioned to accurately reflect the refugee and host communities' needs and to design and implement interventions that are respectful and empowering. The report summarizes the local actors' experiences and voices regarding the UN-led refugee relief mechanisms, offers some examples of local actors' best practices and provides recommendations.

Keywords: Syrian Refugees, Emergency relief, UN relief mechanisms, International humanitarian community, Local Civil Society, Community-based organizations, Community empowerment

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Introduction

As the Syrian crisis enters its fourth year and the numbers of people seeking refuge in Lebanon show little signs of abating, ever-more innovative alternatives are needed to provide relief and support with increasingly diminishing resources.¹ The international humanitarian community's efforts (encompassing the UN agencies and their international NGO partners, INGOs) has been tremendous, particularly given this crisis' evolving challenges, including the wide dispersal of refugees in 1,650 different locations across Lebanon, with 85% of the refugee population not residing in camps, and the incredibly low resettlement rate (approximately 1%).² Nevertheless, without a serious reconsideration and reconfiguration of some of the standard relief approaches applied by the international humanitarian community, the UN-led relief response, instead of finding ways to do more with less, risks doing still less with less.³

This report considers UN-led refugee relief mechanisms in Lebanon, from the perspective of local communities and actors, and contends that input from the Syrian refugee and host communities is not sufficiently sought when designing relief aid strategy and implementation; it furthermore posits that local input is vital to maximizing the benefit and efficiency of relief work. Moreover, as many of the Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) are closely engaged with the local communities, and thus are able to provide quality, low-cost and innovative relief and development services, it is all the more unfortunate that their contributions are all too often overlooked and their insights unsolicited or ignored. As such, this paper provides a few examples of the added-value of locally owned and driven relief work, offering pro-active suggestions to help make the relief aid planning and implementation in Lebanon more responsive to the community, which is better maximizing of local potential and more empowering for the beneficiaries.

Methodology

This report represents the findings from a series of informal interviews with five local actors (seven individuals) working with the Syrian refugee and host communities, including local Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian NGOs and CBOs, as well as activists and practitioners of community development and relief work. The local actors were selected to represent a variety of expertise and approach, including long-standing civil society organizations from both the Lebanese and Palestinian communities and newly founded Syrian groups. The interview respondents represent organizations working in the following areas in Lebanon: Akkar, Tripoli, Bekaa Valley (including Arsal and the western Bekaa), Beirut, Greater Beirut, Saida and its surroundings, and various areas in South Lebanon. Each interview lasted about an hour and a half. This report in no way claims to be representative or exhaustive; rather, the authors hope to help foment a productive conversation among a variety of organizations and actors all working towards improving the quality of living conditions for Syrian refugee and host communities. All informal interviews were held during February and March 2014, in Beirut. Anonymity was guaranteed to all participants in the fieldwork, to whom the authors express deep gratitude and admiration.

1. Local actors' observations and experiences when working with the international humanitarian community

Local actors are uniquely positioned to offer insights into the UN-led refugee relief mechanisms in Lebanon, through the ways that they differ from the larger UN agencies and INGOs: the smaller size of local NGOs and CBOs means that decision-making is more localized, often occurring on site; their staff are largely made up of Lebanese, Palestinian and/or Syrians, thus reducing any language, cultural or contextual barriers; their funds (albeit vastly smaller) have greater flexibility in application; and – especially in Lebanon – the majority of these actors have been engaged in development and relief work with different Lebanese and Palestinian communities for decades, meaning they already have the social and physical infrastructure needed to promote community participation. Their frustrations with the UN-led refugee relief structures in Lebanon stem from their experiences with and observations of the UN and INGO relief work undertaken in the past three years, which, while well-intentioned, is both unable to meet demand and does not sufficiently empower the communities to help themselves.

1.1 Too many gaps, too slow, too centralized

All local actors interviewed stated concern about the mechanisms of the current UN-driven aid structure and were critical of its ability to respond effectively to refugee needs. According to a Syrian activist working with a local relief organization, UN agencies and INGOs have not changed their approaches, even though the problems have changed. “We now have 300 Syrian families in [a Palestinian camp] – UNRWA cannot help them and the UNHCR should help, but they don’t. It’s just us.”⁴ Severely strained host communities are particularly neglected according to the director of a long-standing Palestinian NGO. “The majority of UN and INGO emergency projects – especially the distributions (cash, vouchers, in-kind) – do not target the hardship cases of the host community. The lack of hardship funds for the host community means that they suffer more, too.”⁵ Another local actor with a Syrian relief organization underlined that UNHCR registration remained inaccessible to thousands of incoming refugees, especially for those settling in remote areas. “In the entire South there is only one UNHCR registration point. Who can travel from distant areas, pay transportation, wait until evening, and then wait one month before receiving a voucher?”⁶ Moreover, without registration UNHCR cannot perform its core function of providing international protection for every Syrian refugee who enters Lebanon.

The UN-driven centralized and top-down relief planning and implementation results in persistent gaps with slow and intermittent service delivery, according to all interviewed respondents. An activist from a Lebanese NGO pointed out that the distribution of food and other vouchers remains incomplete, even though they were originally intended to streamline the relief distribution process and render it more efficient.⁷ Moreover, given the constantly changing context, UN-driven aid structures’ lack of flexibility also creates delays and gaps in service. A Lebanese practitioner in community development and relief work, who has piloted affordable and sustainable emergency interventions, described his frustration when working with the UN: “The whole mechanism of UN-centralized relief is flawed. They keep applying centralized approaches and mechanisms that have already been proved to fail.”⁸

1.2 International relief structures are isolated from local governance and local actors

Local development actors interviewed were very concerned by the isolated decision-making and command structures of the UN agencies and INGOs relief mechanisms. The director of a Lebanese NGO undertaking relief work in Beirut, the Bekaa and the South pointed out that UN agencies and INGOs were not accountable to Lebanese governance structures – particularly municipalities and governorates who are directly engaged in the crisis within their communities, can easily assess local refugee absorption status and capacity, and can best determine the effectiveness of relief aid provision on refugees and host families.⁹ He also criticised the fact that the international humanitarian actors had a free hand to design, implement and assess their relief programs and stated that, as such, they are “assuming the role of both the government and local organizations,” rather than filling the gaps that cannot be addressed locally.¹⁰ A Syrian activist commented regretfully that, “the weakness of the Lebanese government allows the UN and INGOs to do what they want and they don’t have to report or respond to local government structures.”¹¹ A Lebanese practitioner pointed out that, “there are many local NGOs and groups who are eager to help, but the UN isolates them. There is good will and hard work among NGOs. Although some lack all the needed skills, they are worthy of being invested in.”¹² Moreover, he added, given the highly developed expertise already present in Lebanon, “the

UN's role could be key to making Lebanon a model for relief, development, and reconstruction – instead, we are witnessing another lost opportunity.”[13](#)

1.3 Difficulty in influencing UN agencies and INGOs' decisions or policies

Four of the five interviewed local actors had attended UNCluster or Sector Meetings,[14](#) which are open to local civil society actors,(although they are conducted only in English), but did not view them very positively. In their opinion, the meetings were lacking in concrete benefit, very weak on field coordination and limited to the presentation of reports by individual organizations. Most respondents had also attempted to communicate with UN agencies and partners, either offering advice or services, soliciting information or support, sharing ideas or relaying views on projects and approaches. But most had little success. They have “no respect for our experience and knowledge,” stated the director of a Palestinian NGO, even though many of the local actors have been providing relief and development work in Lebanon in a variety of crisis settings for over 30 years.[15](#) “There is no venue, no way for us to impact any of their plans.”[16](#)

Several respondents emphasized that UN agencies/INGOs are neither receptive to local insights, nor to criticisms on the implementation of their projects. “I never know who will actually listen. And mostly those who can listen, can't change anything,” explained the Lebanese practitioner who has found it difficult to transfer locally developed knowledge into the UN system.[17](#) According to the director of a Palestinian NGO, for issues related to Palestinian refugees from Syria, there is very little collaborative work on coordination, identifying gaps, setting relief criteria, or looking at long-term planning. “They instruct us, but don't inform us. And when we can access emergency funds, we have to use the same criteria as those set by UNRWA.”[18](#)

However, all interviewed local actors pointed out that the UN agencies or partner INGOs would contact them when they needed information on beneficiaries and the local situation. “They don't think of us as partners,” pointed out one of the Syrian relief organizations; “they just use us for data when they don't want to come to the field.”[19](#) A community-based relief NGO member explained that, “When they want something from us, they call us and ask – like figures. Otherwise there is no contact.”[20](#)

1.4 UN/INGO inefficiency

Respondents mentioned a number of concerns regarding UN/INGO efficiency, including the fear that, because international funds go through more than one organization before reaching the ground, not enough of the funds reach the beneficiaries. There was also concern that the rush to hire international staff by the UN agencies and INGOs has led to insufficient knowledge of the local context and, thus, further inefficiency. “They hire people who treat Lebanon like you would treat Haiti,” pointed out the Lebanese practitioner, in essence applying the same approaches to vastly different contexts.[21](#) “They neither understand the anxieties that Lebanese communities have with each other and with the refugees, nor the bias and the history of the relationship between Lebanon and Syria.”[22](#) Moreover, “if there were different funding modalities available to us,” explained one of the Syrian groups, “small funds for long-term work, funds that were not just linked to distributions, and certainly funds that don't require an eight-page, four-month application process,” then a greater proportion of relief funds would arrive to the refugee and host communities in a shorter amount of time.[23](#)

Several local actors also observed that they had encountered situations where UN agencies or INGOs have not coordinated together. A Syrian NGO member recounted how, during a distribution, “we found families receiving UN-funded relief distributions four times over, but the refugee families in the town’s rural areas were not getting anything at all.”²⁴ Other local actors cited examples where international actors replicated their ideas without any reliance on their expertise, leading to many good ideas and successful interventions being subsequently poorly applied and failing. “We can guide the UN and INGOs on where they can best spend their money and how to avoid corruption,” pointed out the Lebanese practitioner. “Unfortunately they treat us all as irrelevant.”²⁵

Additionally, the director of a Palestinian NGO pointed out, a better division of responsibilities is required to increase efficiency and reduce duplication. She proposed that the UN-led relief actors could focus on the areas of their technical expertise (i.e., shelter, WATSAN), and not duplicate the work of the local actors in areas of their developmental expertise (i.e., psychosocial activities, women’s empowerment).²⁶ This latter type of development work, the director pointed out, is often highly context-dependent and may address sensitive issues, thereby requiring the longer perspective and nuanced approach gained only through prolonged work with these communities.

1.5 Relief work is not empowering the beneficiaries

Despite valiant efforts by many individuals, the relationship between Syrian refugees and international aid providers overall was deemed remote, impersonal and lacking in connection with local refugee community context and realities. A group of Syrian relief activists explained that “[the UN and INGOs] deal with the refugees like numbers, not people.”²⁷ Another activist with a Syrian group added that when the UN and INGOs staff do conduct field visits, some do not know how to interact respectfully with Syrian refugees. “They come to the unofficial encampments and talk to people in English in a patronizing manner and fill out survey after survey. Sometimes there are multiple organizations undertaking surveys at the same time in the same area.”²⁸

Respondents were convinced UN relief aid was too short-term and relief-focused, which disempowers the refugee communities by generating dependency on relief distributions. The Lebanese practitioner criticized the constant reapplication of three-month relief projects, proposing that policy-makers should adopt more sustainable long-term strategies rooted in local structures and communities. “You can only really work when you design and build the project with the host community, the refugees, the civil society actors – all the local actors.”²⁹ A Syrian relief group operating in the Bekaa warned that short-term relief projects were promoting aid-dependency, thus disempowering the refugees and leaving them unprepared for extended displacement.³⁰ Another Syrian NGO member similarly emphasized that current UN relief aid does not empower local actors to deal with the future: “Where are the long-term plans? After three years I don’t see that the UN is empowering local Lebanese or Syrian actors, and this lack of empowerment creates resentment between the two communities.”³¹

In addition, another member of a Syrian NGO pointed out, “We know now that this crisis will not end next year or the year after. Without a longer vision for relief work, the focus will never be on empowering the refugees. One day the funds will dry up and the UN and the INGOs will leave, but have they prepared the communities to carry on without them?”³²

1.6 Remarks on section 1

The UN-led refugee relief mechanisms in Lebanon, as witnessed by local actors and described above, are insufficient to meet the needs of the refugee and host communities. Moreover, by not coordinating and cooperating with the local actors, UN/INGO aid mechanisms often miss out on opportunities to maximize their work for better effect, and may interfere with local actors' ongoing relief and development work.

The application of a centralized approach ignoring local formal and informal governance structures, and the difficulties local actors face when trying to influence UN/INGO interventions, compounds UN/INGO isolation from the nuanced situation on the ground, leading at best to increased inefficiency.

Finally, and of most concern, the majority of the UN-led refugee relief structures are not sufficiently promoting community empowerment and may, in fact, be generating aid dependency. In the current prolonged crisis, efforts should be focused on building refugee and host communities' resilience and coping strategies – an approach that is closer to the development work undertaken by the local actors – rather than a continued focus on short-term relief.

2. Local examples of community-driven and/or community-empowering relief work

Many local actors – Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian NGOs and CBOs – are closely engaged with the local communities and able to provide quality, low-cost and innovative relief and development services. As is described above, their work is all too often overlooked by the UN-led refugee relief structures. The following sections provide a few examples of the added value of locally owned and driven relief work.

2.1 Syrians helping Syrians

One of the untold stories of the relief response to the Syrian emergency in Lebanon is the flourishing of new relief and development organizations founded by Syrian refugees and dedicated to helping Syrian refugees and their host communities. “We were born to respond to the gaps left by the UN's refugee response,” explained the director of one of the larger Syrian-founded relief groups active in numerous locations across Lebanon, “and our work is presented to the people as by Syrians for Syrians.”³³

With the vast majority of their staff and volunteers from the refugee community, the organization claims greater credibility and a better understanding of the needs and problems on the ground. “We believe in refugees helping refugees – our role is only facilitation, the real work on the ground is done by the refugees. Thus we promote the dignity of everyone involved, because the beneficiaries know we respect them, because we are just like them.”³⁴ Another Syrian relief group focuses on providing informal education for children, mainly in the temporary camps in the Bekaa valley. “We work with people on the ground, with local communities using local resources – they help us design and implement our projects. They know we respect them, and they are eager to work with us.”³⁵

The director of a Palestinian NGO with a long history of relief and development work in Lebanon stated

that a main reason their work with the refugees (Syrian and Palestinians from Syria) has been so effective is that “we contract people from the displaced communities to work on our relief projects.”³⁶ She explained how the NGO provided training for the new staff – “we gave them a complete skill package” as most of the hired refugees lacked NGO or relief work experience. Now, “when they go back to the field there is a better level of communication because they come from the same background as the communities we are working with, so it’s easier for them to understand and to help.”³⁷

2.1 Locally driven, locally owned

Regardless of the type or sector of relief work provided (ranging from sanitation to cash distributions to informal education and psychosocial support), all actors interviewed stressed that projects designed and implemented with the local communities were invariably the most successful. “All the best ideas I’ve encountered or implemented,” explained the Lebanese practitioner in community development and relief work, “came first from the refugees themselves.”³⁸ As an example, he described a conversation he had with a woman from Syria in an informal settlement in the Bekaa. “She asked why an INGO was building individual showers. ‘Just make us a hamamarabi, we can wash all the children at once’ she said. And I realized of course, a communal shower won’t use as much water, can clean many people simultaneously, and it’s culturally accepted.”³⁹

A Palestinian NGO described how they managed to make a standard distribution both tailored to the refugee community’s needs and more empowering for the community, by first holding discussions with community members. “We were able to prioritize their needs, and they said they wanted to do their own shopping, so the vouchers we distributed were applicable to almost all food items.” The vouchers were also divided up into small amounts, “letting them go shopping five or six times a month, like you normally would.”⁴⁰

The Syrian group providing informal education explained how their strong relationship with the refugee communities allowed them to provide informal education to children from 5-14 years old on a daily basis, through resources available in the community. “The teachers are refugees from within the community, who hold diplomas. The work makes them feel useful and enables them to contribute, and we can pay them a symbolic monthly stipend.”⁴¹ The curriculum is mixed and was designed with the local teachers. “The classes are free, the material is donated, and we provide the children with clothing, milk and other basic needs. Since we set up this project, more parents have stopped sending their children to work and the number of children attending grows monthly.”⁴²

Another Syrian organization began implementing livelihood training and projects for women over a year and half ago – “long before the big trend for livelihoods began,” the organization’s director pointed out.⁴³ “We didn’t decide to work on women’s empowerment because we thought it could attract donors; we did it because we met with women who needed support and they told us what they wanted. They wanted ways to escape the despair they felt living in crowded, sub-standard housing with no hope and nothing to do and no way of making their situation better.”⁴⁴ Through the women’s livelihoods project, “we provide them with a healthy space to learn and they have become productive and proud of themselves.”⁴⁵ Most of the project’s graduates have begun some form of work, either independently or through the organization. “When we see someone getting a real job and supporting

their family and working with still other Syrian refugees to help them, then we know our work is truly empowering.”[46](#)

2.3 Remarks on section 2

The examples of relief and development work undertaken by local actors differ from the standard relief approach in the extent to which the projects were designed in coordination with the refugee and host communities, implemented by the intended beneficiaries, promoting simple sustainability, and empowering of the local communities. With vastly smaller resources, the local actors were nevertheless able to ensure that their work not only responds to the needs on the ground, but also empowers the projects’ beneficiaries to undertake similar work on their own.

3. A few suggestions

3.1 Promote input from local actors

As described above, most local actors interviewed expressed frustration at how little their input was sought or valued in UN/INGO relief planning and implementation. Despite the decades of experience providing emergency relief and development services in Lebanon that some of the local actors interviewed have accumulated, they felt their experience, knowledge and expertise was ignored. Local actors also felt they were not treated as partners, even though they were more present on the ground, and that they were used by UN agencies and INGOs mainly as a source of data. These same actors also pointed out that, without support for local actor involvement coming from key decision-makers in the UN system, it was likely that very little would change.

The valuable insights, knowledge and experience of the local actors must be promoted through the UNHCR’s recommended Lebanon Humanitarian International NGO Forum[47](#) and individual UN Agencies and INGOs’ increased efforts. Their input, as equal partners, remains key to ensuring relief work is not only more efficient and effective, but also respects and empowers the refugee and host communities. Moreover, given Lebanon’s well-developed and highly experienced civil society, the current crisis represents an opportunity for the UN to showcase a new model of UN, INGO and local actor coordination and cooperation.

3.2 Offer a range of funding opportunities to more local actors

At present, UN and international governmental funds pass through three or four actors before they reach the ground (i.e., governmental funds to UN agency to INGO to local NGO to implementing local actor). This not only increases the amount of time needed before the funds are in effect on the ground, but also results in a portion of any relief fund being spent on numerous organizational overhead and administrative costs. Moreover, due to this process, when local actors are provided with some percentage of these funds, the implementation methodology and approach has already been determined without any input from the local actors. In essence, relief mechanisms are determined by organizations not actually undertaking the implementation.

Additional funding modalities should be designed to allow for local actors to directly access certain international funds. Not only would overhead and administrative costs be reduced, (as the funds would pass through fewer intermediaries before they were active on the ground), but the funds' implementers would have designed the proposed implementation. Such a funding modality should prioritize a quick application process with a user-friendly proposal template, reducing the time between the release of the funds and any implementation on the ground. The funds should also be designed to target long-term work (as opposed to three-month interventions), which increases the self-reliance of the refugee and host communities, rather than focus on the provision and distribution of relief.

3.3 Use and invest in local resources

The Syrian refugee population consists of people with a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience. As discussed above, relief work can – and should – not merely meet basic needs of the refugees, but also invest in and empower them to become more self-reliant. In addition to agriculture and construction workers, far too many Syrian refugees are un- or under-employed teachers, health care professionals, electricians, plumbers, accountants, computer specialists, and so on. They were rendered dependent on relief aid by traumatic experiences, sub-standard living conditions and a difficult (if not hostile) labor market. However, the local actors interviewed who work with the skills found in various refugee communities (like using teachers for informal education) reported a high rate of success in both the work undertaken and also in creating a more positive, empowered community.

Additionally, promoting the use of refugee human resources could help decrease tensions between the host and refugee communities by “shifting the perception of the refugees from burden to asset.”⁴⁸ In a recent article, Shibli proposed that cash-for-work projects be set up to temporarily employ Syrian refugees in ecologically sustainable agricultural work (like terracing and cultivating untapped communal land), implemented and governed through local municipalities.⁴⁹ Other local actors proposed that the UN agencies and INGOs prioritize hiring Syrian refugees for service delivery projects, (like dentistry or electrical/mechanical repairs), which could also be offered to the host communities.⁵⁰

Finally, as was pointed out by the director of a Syrian organization, some of the relief distribution items (i.e., the blankets or dried food items in the Winterization Distributions) could, with planning and coordination, be increasingly locally sourced.⁵¹ At present, much of the contents of most relief distributions are imported. However, if certain distribution items were locally produced, it could provide cash-for-work opportunities to less skilled Syrian refugees and manufacturing/production opportunities to the Lebanese industry.

3.4 National response plan

The need for a national response plan designed by the Lebanese government has been discussed regularly since the crisis began. However, as the director of a long-standing Lebanese NGO pointed out, due to the unique and long experience of local civil society, such a response plan should and must be designed in coordination with the local actors, including Lebanese and Palestinian NGOs and Syrian organizations.⁵² The response plan should include a clear division of tasks between the Lebanese government, local civil society, and the international humanitarian community. It should also include a number of contingency plans, with a long-term approach, and should prioritize efforts to reduce

tensions between the host and refugee communities, as well as support a greater decentralization of work.⁵³ In Shibli's paper,⁵⁴ he proposes a structure for decentralizing the relief response, where UN agencies and their international partners work through the various Lebanese local government structures, thereby allowing the relief response to more localized, reflecting the decentralized nature of the refugee crisis.

3.5 Participatory assessment of the past three years

A participatory assessment conference – held in a public forum in an accessible location in Lebanon with translation provided, and ideally designed through a participatory process – would provide all relief actors the opportunity to review the lessons learnt in the past three years, and begin addressing longer-term trends and emerging needs. All interviewed local actors stressed the need for better long-term planning and coordination efforts that reduce duplication, and they all also stated that the current structures for such planning (i.e., the Cluster or Sector meetings), were not spaces where they felt welcome or saw as productive. This conference, then, could become the first step in rebuilding and redesigning the relationship between UN-led relief mechanisms and the local actors, towards a comprehensive, locally driven response to the Syrian crisis.

4. In conclusion

Despite – and because of – these concerns, critiques and suggestions, all local actors interviewed also hastened to add their awareness of the good work undertaken by the UN agencies and INGOs and their gratitude for work undertaken with insufficient funds in very difficult conditions. “The UN, and its international partners, are of course indispensable,” pointed out a Palestinian activist. “UNHCR is indispensable for the protection of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and guarantor for the application of international law.” Moreover, added a Lebanese activist, “We are, of course, in dire need of international support. We need their skills and support and their know-how. But we'd like the chance to discuss their role, reconfigure it, to plan and design and work together.”

() Leila Zakharia and Sonya Knox are social development experts with extensive regional experience. In 2011 they founded Ibtikar Research & Consulting s.a.l., based in Beirut.*

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