



Responding to a Refugee Influx: Lessons from Lebanon

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Executive Summary

Between 2011 and 2015, Lebanon received over one million Syrian refugees. There is no country in the world that has taken in as many refugees in proportion to its size: by 2015, one in four of its residents was a refugee from Syria. Already beset, prior to the Syrian crisis, by political divisions, insecure borders, severely strained infrastructure, and over-stretched public services, the mass influx of refugees further taxed the country. That Lebanon withstood what is often characterized as an existential threat is primarily due to the remarkable resilience of the Lebanese people. It is also due to the unprecedented levels of humanitarian funding that the international community provided to support refugees and the communities that hosted them. UN, international, and national partners scaled up more than a hundred-fold to meet ever-burgeoning needs and creatively endeavored to meet challenges on the ground. And while the refugee response was not perfect, and funding fell well below needs, thousands of lives were saved, protection was extended, essential services were provided, and efforts were made to improve through education the future prospects of the close to half-a-million refugee children residing in Lebanon. This paper examines what worked well and where the refugee response stumbled, focusing on areas where improved efforts in planning, delivery, coordination, innovation, funding, and partnerships can enhance future emergency responses.

I. Introduction

Over a three-and-a-half year period, beginning in the spring of 2011, Lebanon, a small country of just 4,000 square miles, received over one million Syrian refugees. The impact of both the Syrian conflict and the refugee influx on Lebanon has been profound. By 2015, one in four residents in Lebanon was a refugee from Syria, and Lebanon hosted the second largest number of refugees in the world. In relative terms, the number of Syrian refugees

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Lebanon has received would be the equivalent to the United States receiving approximately 108 million refugees, or Europe receiving approximately 169 million refugees.²

This paper examines the international and national response to what is considered one of the severest challenges faced by Lebanon in all its complex history. It covers the four-year period from the spring of 2011 until February 2015, when border restrictions effectively stemmed the flow of refugees to the country. The refugee response was not short of missteps. But it was also full of great accomplishments: hundreds of thousands of refugees were received and protected, and basic needs were met, while efforts expanded to support local communities and national institutions in what was, and continues to be seen as, an existential challenge for Lebanon.

The war in Syria continues: its impact now reverberates beyond the region while other new and ongoing conflicts force millions to flee or remain in protracted displacement. There is much to be learned from the response to the extraordinary challenges in Lebanon. This paper examines the key lessons learned during the four years from 2011 to 2015. It focuses on areas that can improve the timeliness and effectiveness of refugee responses, including in regard to preparedness, scaling up, protecting refugees, coordinating efforts, mobilizing resources, expanding partnerships, engaging innovative practices, and ensuring humanitarian actions are fully accountable to those being helped.

II. Context

A. Political Environment

At the start of the Syrian crisis, Lebanon had hosted Palestinian refugees for over 60 years, estimated in 2010 to number 280,000 persons living in conditions considered among the most marginal in the Middle East.³ A country that was officially at war with Israel, that suffered from severe and often paralyzing internal political divisions and frequent security breaches, was on the cusp of becoming the largest recipient of refugees in the world, and arguably the most challenged by the influx.

The experience of hosting Palestinian refugees influenced to a great degree Lebanon's fears and responses to Syrian refugees. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled to Lebanon in 1948, and as their stay became prolonged, restrictions on their rights within Lebanon were imposed, including being confined to camps that through time became over-crowded and under-serviced urbanized areas. Ongoing marginalization contributed to Palestinian support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which relocated to Lebanon following its expulsion from Jordan in 1970. PLO involvement in Lebanon's brutal civil war (1975-1990), which politically and economically devastated the country, fueled resentment within Lebanon against Palestinians and stigmatized the entire Palestinian community. From the

2 For the United States (US) and European Union (EU) population data see respectively: <http://www.census.gov/popclock/>; <https://data.oecd.org/pop/population.htm>.

3 United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) registration numbers since 1948 show that as of 2011, 425,000 Palestinians had registered in Lebanon. A socioeconomic survey of Palestinians in Lebanon published at the end of 2010 estimated that due to mass migration, 260,000–280,000 Palestinian refugees resided in Lebanon (Chaaban et al. 2010).

early days of the Syrian refugee influx, and based on the experience with Palestinian refugees, Lebanese authorities, with few exceptions, ruled out any possibility of establishing formal refugee camps⁴ for fear they would become permanent. Similar reasons were given for the refusals to enable legal recognition of temporary residence and to facilitate registration of Syrian refugee births.

Lebanon's long and close history with Syria was another factor that influenced the Lebanese government's response to the refugee crisis. During the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon was considered part of "Greater Syria" which geographically embraced Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. From 1976 to 2005, Syria maintained a military presence and wielded strong political influence in Lebanon. Syrian ties inside Lebanon therefore were and remain strong. Throughout the Syrian crisis, successive Lebanese governments have adopted a policy of neutrality, officially known as "disassociation," towards the situation inside Syria. Nonetheless, the two major political coalitions within Lebanon were divided, with one supportive of the Syrian opposition cause and the other backing the government of Syria. Public policy formation, including concerning refugees, often faced gridlock due to these divisions.

Between 2011 and mid-2015, Lebanon had three different governments. There were also periods of caretaker governments when policy decision making reached a standstill. The government of Prime Minister Tamam Salam was formed in February 2014, and in May of that year, with the end of the presidential term of Michel Suleiman, the dominant political actors agreed that executive decision making would be reached by consensus. In many fundamental matters of basic governance, as well as issues pertaining to refugees, such consensus was hard to secure. Political divisions further exacerbated gridlock at the executive and legislative levels by forestalling for over two years the election of a president and the reaching of an agreement on a roadmap for legislative elections.

An additional challenge facing the government in the management of the refugee response was the lack of a specific legal framework or dedicated and comprehensive administrative system for the management of refugee affairs. Suggestions to create an administrative system were perceived as an attempt to perpetuate the presence of refugees in the country and therefore were not advanced. All humanitarian activities had to be coordinated across a number of ministries, each of which faced severe capacity issues in addressing their regular responsibilities, let alone the additional ones brought on by the refugee influx.

Finally, although the governance system is largely centralized, the absence of comprehensive policies to manage the refugee influx meant that decision making often devolved by default to the local level. Lebanon, which can comfortably fit within the state of Connecticut, has eight governorates, 26 districts (whose leaders are centrally appointed) and 1,108 municipalities whose leaders are elected by their constituents. Municipal authorities were the first responders and, despite significant administrative and financial constraints,

4 From the outset, UNHCR did not seek a camp option for refugees but did advocate for greater support to host communities so that refugees could live with as much dignity, independence, and normality as possible. When the numbers of arrivals exceeded available shelter supply, UNHCR discussed with the authorities the possibility of establishing temporary shelter sites to relieve the situation of hundreds of thousands of refugees living in insecure informal sites. This idea was supported by some politicians as a humanitarian necessity but never received the consensus required.

had to make decisions to deal with the massive influx of refugees in their communities. Humanitarian efforts, therefore, had to navigate a complicated web of at times competing political agendas between the various levels of government. This was essential to ensure activities were appropriately authorized and to maintain the real and perceived impartiality of humanitarian action.

B. Overview of the Influx

The Syrian refugee influx into Lebanon initially was relatively modest. The first group of Syrian refugees fled to northern Lebanon in April 2011. They came from areas in and around Tallalakh, Homs, which had been the locus of confrontation between opposition protesters and government forces. Several thousand Syrians fled from this confrontation and traversed the few kilometers between Talkhalekh and Wadi Khaled in north Lebanon. Most sought refuge with friends or family and many returned over the ensuing months to areas where tensions had subsided. At the end of the year there were only 5,000 Syrian registered refugees in Lebanon.

In the next 12 months, however, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon increased to 175,000 before further swelling to over 800,000 at the close of 2013. By this time they were spread throughout the entire country. For 21 months, between January 2013 until border restrictions began to be progressively imposed in September 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was registering on average over 48,000 refugees per month.

By this time, the Lebanese had gone beyond being uneasy about the influx, and across all political lines there was a consensus that the unabated arrival of refugees threatened the continued stability of the country. The incidents in Aarsal, a small town perched on the rocky slopes of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains bordering Syria, marked a turning point. Aarsal had been a port of safety for over 40,000 Syrian refugees whose number by August 2014 eclipsed that of the local population of 35,000 inhabitants. Syrian opposition fighters moved freely in and out of Aarsal and, in early August 2014, they engaged in a violent stand-off with the Lebanese Army that left 19 Lebanese soldiers and 42 civilians dead, hundreds of soldiers and civilians wounded, and 29 policemen and soldiers captured by Al-Nusra and ISIS forces.

Lebanon had reached a crossroads. At the time of the Aarsal stand-off, the Syrian refugee population exceeded one million. Refugees were living in very dire circumstances. Most rented overcrowded and very basic apartments or small plots of land to pitch a tent. Others found shelter in garages, worksites, and unfinished buildings. As the crisis progressed, more and more Syrians without any shelter populated the streets of Beirut, including refugee children who, in states of abject poverty and neglect, could be found shining shoes, begging, and living under bridges. Of the 400,000 school aged child refugees, only one quarter were enrolled in formal education and less than half had access to any education at all.

Other consequences of the Syrian refugee influx also had become clear by the time of the battle at Aarsal. Primary health care clinics were overstretched, with Lebanese experiencing

long waits for medical attention as more Syrian refugees sought service. An already frail infrastructure (water, electricity, sanitation) was severely taxed by the additional demand. Electricity interruptions, which had been a flash point of protests before the refugees arrived, were now more frequent. Lack of appropriate waste disposal and waste and water treatment — endemic in Lebanon — was more pungent and visible, with river beds near refugee settlements choked with garbage and land around collective centers similarly overflowing with refuse. Low-wage Lebanese workers saw their limited employment opportunities shrink as Syrian adult and child refugees were willing to work for even lower pay than they were.

Every town and village across the country had Syrian refugees, and many villages contained more refugees than local residents. Lebanese saw their small country being transformed and Aarsal, it was widely felt, pointed to the risks the refugee influx posed. Tightening the borders was well supported by all political parties, as were broader efforts to restrict refugee movement within Lebanon, evict refugees from sensitive areas, and discourage prolonged stay.

C. Operational Response

While a full description of the expansion of agency responses to the refugee influx in Lebanon is beyond the scope of this paper, mentioning a few highlights is warranted. In virtually all areas of the agencies' engagement, responses matured. Reception moved from an ad hoc process to ensuring a border presence that provided information to prospective refugees on how to register with UNHCR and referred those in urgent need to care providers. Registration went from relying largely on mobile teams, to permanent registration centers in four locations fitted with biometric iris scan technology. Registration centers were equipped with places for children to play and for mothers to nurse their babies in privacy, as well as with immunization centers run by the Ministry of Health and the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF). UNHCR and the Ministry of Social Affairs provided social and protection counseling at the registration centers. Shelter interventions that initially focused on provision of in-kind assistance (materials, renovations of empty buildings for collective centers, and the provision of small housing units to landlords for installment on their land) gradually shifted to greater reliance on cash for rent or to buy shelter supplies.

In-kind provision of food, initially by the government and later by the World Food Program (WFP), was eventually replaced by a WFP-run cash voucher system. Initial reliance on trucking of water to refugees in informal settlements was progressively overtaken by more sustainable options, such as investing in wells and reservoirs which also benefited local communities. Ad-hoc assistance in meeting primary and secondary health care needs eventually gave way to investing more in primary health care centers, and a new and innovative means to engage a private sector health administrator to apply guidelines, monitor costs and efficiencies, and approve more costly secondary care. In regard to education, the goal was to ensure as many school-age refugees as possible were accommodated in the public system. The efforts gained significant traction when a consortium consisting of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), UN agencies, the World Bank (WB) and donors formed a steering committee to assess the investments needed to ensure every

refugee child was enrolled in school, to approve the budgets necessary, and to endorse and promote the collective appeals that followed.

Investment in community support projects also grew exponentially over the years. For UNHCR, this was important from various perspectives. In the first place, local communities were the first responders, opening up their homes and their properties to an ever-increasing number of refugees. Investing in community projects, some related to the refugee presence and others to address systemic gaps in local services that predated the refugee crisis, was both an important measure of appreciation and helped to maintain a positive environment towards refugees. Initial investments in community support projects by UNHCR of \$170,000 in 2012 increased to over \$24 million by the end of 2014.⁵

Combined with national efforts, international contributions had an important impact. Over a million refugees who fled into Lebanon were received and registered. Hundreds of thousands of refugees required and received food, shelter, and health assistance. Tens of thousands were provided with specialized services to meet their specific needs. Community centers grew to provide services to refugees and local residents, and projects to address systemic gaps in service delivery at the municipal level were expanded, while targeted support to ministries was increased. This was made possible by international humanitarian contributions that increased from less than \$20 million in 2011 to \$1 billion in 2015. At the same time, persistent budget shortfalls⁶ meant that food security remained precarious, shelter for tens of thousands of refugees was substandard, sanitation remained a constant challenge, and various negative impacts of the crisis — including illness and death from preventable causes — remained a constant scar on the refugee landscape.

Moreover, refugees faced considerable risks to their security which humanitarian assistance and protection advocacy could not lessen. The Lebanese authorities remained reluctant to relax the residency permit system, which remained too costly for most refugees to afford. This left refugees open to arrest and detention, and vulnerable to abuse and extortion from unscrupulous landlords. Similarly, while Lebanon has always relied on Syrian workers, progressive restrictions on the issuing of work permits left many refugees unable to secure work, while others who could find informal employment were exposed to serious exploitation by employers. The authorities also would not agree to facilitate the registration of refugee births, which were estimated to exceed 40,000 in 2015. Lebanese law mandates the registration of all births in Lebanon. However, refugees had great difficulty obtaining birth certificates for their newborns due to complicated administrative processes, burdensome fees, and arbitrary actions by local authorities. In the absence of a birth certificate attesting to the place of birth and nationality of the parents, refugee children in Lebanon have no official legally recognized identity and therefore are at risk of being stateless. The consequences can be severe and include the inability to attend school, to receive medical care, to travel, to work legally, to marry, or to pass on one's nationality to one's children.

5 Notwithstanding the positive impact on communities, it is also the case that development support in areas such as water, waste management, electricity and health, and other service provision fell woefully short of what was required to address the impact of the refugee presence in Lebanon. This is discussed more fully in section III(D).

6 The inter-agency refugee and resilience response plan for Lebanon was consistently underfunded with shortfalls averaging 55 percent in 2015 and 2016.

III. Lessons Learned

A. Preparedness

Reflecting back on the early years of the Syrian crisis, it is perhaps surprising to see the short term planning time frames used and what turned out to be erroneous contingency scenarios engaged. However, buoyed by the initial phases of the Arab Spring that had swept through Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt, there was a general view that the crisis inside Syria would be short-lived. To be sure, there were those who predicted otherwise, but this was not the dominant view of the refugees or the Lebanese, nor was it the dominant view of the humanitarian actors whose initial contingency planning underestimated by far the influx to come. Humanitarian forecasting in the Syrian situation seemed to be based more on previous experience elsewhere, than grounded in a firm understanding of the social, political, and economic history within Syria.

Certainly throughout 2011 and the first half of 2012, the expectation was that displacement would be contained — through political concessions inside Syria, the Syrian government exerting control over areas of insurrection, or a stalemate in parts of Syria. In Lebanon, UNHCR contingency planning in December 2011 estimated a refugee population of 7,000 for the next year, accounting for future arrivals. Nine months later, when the refugee population reached 57,000 persons and was rising by 10,000 persons per month, the influx was projected to reach 300,000 by mid-2013. By June of 2013, however, over half a million Syrian refugees were registered with UNHCR, with more than 65,000 newly registered each month.

Initially, projections were based on the expectation that — as in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya — mass refugee flows would abate. As the conflict spread and the volume continued to grow, other factors limited projections. Of these, the most significant factor was the sense that humanitarian planning based on projected political outcomes was fraught with risks. Humanitarian action is grounded in four principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. These must be upheld at all times to ensure access to persons in need. A contingency plan based on projected outcomes, especially in highly politicized conflict situations, risks being seen as being partial. In the Syria context, projecting mass outflows could have been perceived poorly by the Syrian government, hindered humanitarian operations there, and caused panic in neighboring countries.

It is also the case that once the influx reached a critical mass, agencies were stretched to meet daily and growing needs, and so there was simply no time to spare for projecting further increases and what that would require for agency scale-up.

Contingency planning that fell far short of what materialized was not unique to Lebanon. In fact, by 2013, UNHCR realized that a new planning vehicle was needed and developed a Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies, which is now complemented by an inter-agency one (UNHCR 2017; IASC n.d.). Essentially, this methodology facilitates planning informed by assessing risks but not exclusively so: Agencies can plan on what may be needed in various different escalating scenarios without formally assessing the likelihood of those scenarios occurring. In effect, this methodology removes the need to forecast a

political outcome and allows for preparedness planning for a range of scenarios from the modest to most grave. It also assists in ensuring advance planning and readiness and avoids multiple revisions of contingency planning due to rapidly changing realities on the ground.

B. Agency Scale-up

Enhanced preparedness planning may have helped to avert some of the difficulties agencies had in ensuring necessary staffing and program implementation capacity to meet growing demands. Other challenges, however, would have remained regardless of the effectiveness of preparedness measures.

For humanitarian actors, keeping up with the increase in scale of the influx was a major challenge, not the least for UNHCR. The crisis was a slow burn, starting with a small influx in 2011, building slowly through 2012 and then expanding massively throughout 2013 to 2015. The government could not cope and it fell upon UNHCR along with UN and NGO partners to receive and assist an ever burgeoning refugee population scattered across the hundreds of small communities in which they settled. In 2011, when the crisis began, UNHCR had one small office in Beirut, assisting 10,000 mostly Iraqi refugees with an operating budget of just four million dollars. Within four years, UNHCR had six offices strategically located throughout the country, assisting over one million refugees with an operating budget of \$322 million.⁷

Managing such a rapid expansion required overcoming a variety of challenges. Between 2012 and 2014, UNHCR struggled to find physical space to register and receive all refugees. Many landlords were hesitant to provide space or willing only to provide it for limited lengths of time. As a result, UNHCR experienced 16 office set-ups and relocations throughout the country. The number and needs of refugees sky-rocketed, requiring constant expansion of programs and the staff to design and deliver needed assistance. UNHCR went from having a few implementing partners to having over 40, and from having just 65 staff members initially to having 800 when the influx was at its peak.

Rapid emergency scale-up is part of UNHCR's DNA. It relies on the quick deployment of experienced professional international staff in critical functional areas (protection, program, shelter, administration, finance, and human resources), bolstered by recruitment of national staff who often need rapid training to assume their functions. National staff typically outnumber international staff by a factor of 3:1. This formula usually ensures a smooth capacity increase, but 2013 proved anything but usual. The magnitude of the Syria displacement, coming on the heels of the Arab Spring and consequent mass displacement in North Africa, and occurring at the same time as emergencies in Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the Philippines, created challenges in identifying and deploying experienced staff in sufficient numbers and with the functional background needed to establish fully effective operational responses.

UNHCR reinforces its emergency staffing capacity in a staggered manner, starting with initial emergency deployments of a few months' duration, drawing from expertise available

⁷ UNHCR's budget, although consistently less than projected needs, rose continually throughout the period and cumulatively amounted to \$907 million for the 2012–2015 period.

in the region and beyond. These emergency deployments, often managed through rosters and partner stand-by arrangements, are frequently engaged several times, as they were in Lebanon, until a more stable staffing structure can be put in place.⁸

Other emergency-oriented international partners also had rapid deployment schemes. However, many Beirut-based international agencies who wanted to contribute were unable to deliver programs at the desired level of speed or breadth because of insufficient capacity to expand quickly and effectively outside the capital as the situation demanded. This created challenges, for it meant that capacity on the ground was simply not able to match the need during the initial years. It also led to concerns that UNHCR was too dominant, and engaged in areas where its operational partners were believed to have a comparative advantage, notwithstanding delays in being able to deliver on that advantage.

Moreover, despite UNHCR's ability to deploy quickly, the refugee emergencies that swept the globe from 2012–2014 highlighted shortages of staff trained in the areas of administration, finance, project control, and supply. These competencies are all critical in managing the heavy procurement, disbursement, project monitoring, audit, and strengthening partner capacity necessary in an emergency response. UNHCR has since engaged in recruitment exercises to attract new staff with the required competencies, and has expanded the number of national officers with these skill sets. These actions are appropriate. The Lebanon crisis has made clear the need for extremely forward-looking human resource planning by UNHCR and all partners to ensure that staff with required skills will be available to meet emergency needs.

C. Coordination

In Lebanon, as in 136 countries, around the world, UN agencies ensure coordination of their activities as part of a UN Country Team (UNCT). Agencies jointly plan using a UN development planning framework, and generally the plan becomes operational once endorsed by the government of the country concerned. The UNCT is led by a resident coordinator who also serves as head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Within the UNCT, agencies lead in areas according to their mandate and expertise, with UNHCR in the lead on refugee responses. The planning framework extends for five years. In Lebanon, prior to the refugee influx, most UN agencies were engaged in providing policy guidance to the Office of the Prime Minister and to government ministries in one or more of the following five areas: governance, human rights, gender, socioeconomic development, and the environment. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) ran the largest humanitarian program, while UNHCR had a rather modest program to meet the needs of 10,000 mostly Iraqi refugees.

Given its specialization, and pursuant to its mandate, UNHCR, alongside the government, coordinated the work of UN and partner agencies in regard to the refugee response. Although

⁸ A more stable second phase, beyond emergency deployments, was facilitated in Lebanon by the initiation of an accelerated redeployment scheme, which enabled advertising, selection and redeployment of existing UNHCR staff much more quickly than under normal procedures. This redeployment on a fast-track basis ensured a relatively efficient staffing scale up, although admittedly by placing a strain on other UNHCR operations which saw their staff leave earlier than anticipated to meet emergency needs in Lebanon and the region

the government's capacity was limited, seeking and helping to capacitate government leadership early on was essential in ensuring necessary approval and authority for the expansion necessary to meet the needs of refugees and the communities that were assisting them.⁹ It was the case, however, that regardless of this early engagement, coordination with the authorities remained a challenge given the many different government actors involved and the absence of detailed policy guidance being issued at the central level.

No less challenging was coordination among UN and partner agencies. Here the problems were threefold: initial lack of capacity, insufficient local focus, and overlapping and duplicative UN processes.

Firstly, agencies were initially short of capacity in the form of staff and information management tools to meet growing demands. The scale-up of appropriate staff remedied the former while the introduction of new automated tools greatly enhanced the latter. But these remedies should ideally have come far earlier in the crisis.

Related to this challenge was the fact that UN and international partner agencies had a relatively heavy presence in Beirut and readily attended coordination meetings there but had little presence in the field areas where the majority of refugees and communities in which they lived needed support. As a consequence, there were insufficient links between policy decisions taken in the inter-agency meetings in Beirut, and implementation taking place in the field. Similarly, policy decisions were limited by an incomplete understanding of the opportunities and constraints faced by humanitarians in the field, which varied in each location. This heavy Beirut-based focus shifted gradually with a more proportionate engagement in the field as UNHCR and its implementing and operational partners delegated more program management and decision making to field offices in late 2013 and 2014. Again, this decentralization should have come sooner.

Secondly, since most agency activities had been traditionally Beirut-based, they did not have a significant understanding of the local governance structures at an early stage. One clear lesson from Lebanon, applicable across many humanitarian contexts, is that it is not sufficient to coordinate only with central authorities. Engaging local authorities is also critical and investment in both must occur at the outset. This is also an area where good preparedness planning prior to an emergency is essential. In the Lebanon situation, UN and partner agencies did not have a detailed enough view or understanding of the governance structure in Lebanon from the central to the local level nor deep connections to local authorities. UNDP had invested heavily in strengthening capacities of both central and local authorities but this experience was not widely shared. A mapping of government actors at various levels, accompanied by clear analysis of their respective accountabilities and authorities, would have helped to produce stronger area-based coordination earlier in the crisis, and would have improved outcomes for both refugees and impacted communities.

A third constraint to effective inter-agency coordination was the duplicative coordination mechanisms of the United Nations. Consistent with its relatively rapid initial scale-up,

⁹ For example, initially registration was done jointly with the government, as was food distribution, until the number of refugees eclipsed the ability of the government to continue. But the early engagement was critical, and helped to counter later allegations that UNHCR had registered and assisted refugees without government approval.

UNHCR assumed leadership positions not just for the overall refugee response but also in sectors where other agencies felt they had a comparative advantage. UNHCR took this approach because many such agencies initially faced substantial constraints in deployments and operational delivery. A system of co-leadership was undertaken from the outset in sectors such as social cohesion and livelihoods, education, water, sanitation, and health. While this made sense initially, UNHCR could have more readily relinquished its co-leadership of these sectors as soon as its operational partners were able to take them on, and focused instead on areas in which UNHCR's capacity and leadership are recognized: protection, shelter, and overall coordination of the refugee response. This would have helped to ease the tension and competition between agencies which characterized the early years of the response.

An additional complicating factor in the Lebanon situation was an overlap and duplication brought about by the creation of a humanitarian country team (HCT) that worked in parallel to the refugee coordination structure and the UNCT.

In June 2012, when the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon was just 8,300 persons, the UN emergency relief coordinator appointed a humanitarian coordinator (HC) for Lebanon. While this appointment was not intended to organize a refugee response, the fact was that the refugee influx was the dominant humanitarian concern in the country. The designation of a humanitarian coordinator, who was also the resident coordinator (RC) serving in a dual capacity, was followed by the creation of a HCT consisting of UN agencies, the International Organization for Migration, NGO representatives, and members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Donor representation was later added.

As the situation became more complex inside Lebanon, the need for a more robust response to strengthen Lebanese institutions and support communities affected by the Syrian crisis became more readily recognized. This was a pivotal moment. The work could have been pursued as part of the UNCT. Relevant agencies of the UN Development System, which provides the policy advice to UNCTs, should have worked to reinforce the capacity of the UNCT to reorient its work accordingly and to engage NGOs and donors in the process. Instead, the RC was designated as HC with a mandate to initiate a parallel coordination structure.

There were now three coordination mechanisms operating in tandem with the government: the refugee response led by UNHCR; the humanitarian response led by the humanitarian coordinator; and the longer term development response within the UNCT. For the former, while policy was set in Beirut, the bulk of the efforts — assessments, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation — were done in the field. In contrast, both UNCT and HCT meetings generally were information sharing, with a heavy focus on the refugee response.

The cost of the additional HCT process, in terms of time, and also arguably in diminished relevance of the UNCT, was notable. Throughout 2014 and 2015 there were separate and often bi-weekly meetings of the HCT and UNCT, with each meeting 1.5 to 2.5 hours in duration. Both meetings occurred in Beirut and often covered the same agenda items. The meetings regularly occurred a few days apart and were attended by over 24 agencies. The most significant difference between the two meetings was that donors and NGO partners attended the HCT.

In the end, there was a consolidated plan, with UNHCR leading on the refugee response component and UNDP leading on the resilience and stabilization side. By this time, the growth of UNDP's capacity allowed it to embrace its role. However, rather than starting with this approach from the outset, as part of a capacitated UNCT, an additional layer was added which depleted the already stretched time and resources of humanitarian and development partners.

The value of an HCT is indisputable in humanitarian emergencies, particularly when there is widespread internal displacement, which was the reason for their creation. Ideally, however, even in such situations, the life of the HCT should be limited and investments made to capacitate the existing UNCT and bring in additional partners from donor, NGO, and private sector spheres as necessary, to holistically support a country with its humanitarian and development challenges. This would prevent duplication and reflect the growing consensus that humanitarian and development actions should be linked from the outset of an emergency. Coordination should be streamlined and the UNCT held accountable for delivering on its mandate, as calls for empowered RC and UNCT leadership increasingly demand.

D. Development Action

While there is no doubt that the creation of the HCT added an additional layer of coordination, it is also the case that the UNCT failed to flexibly reorient itself to the changing situation in Lebanon. Within the UNCT, agency joint planning — often referred to as joined up planning — was based on desired development outcomes conceived and approved well before the Syrian crisis. Many agencies were pursuing objectives with various ministries that had little or nothing to do with humanitarian relief to refugees. The concern was frequently expressed that the humanitarian response not overshadow or distract from the important development priorities in which agencies were already engaged. Even in 2013, when it became clear that the crisis in Syria was likely to be protracted, it was difficult to reorient development priorities and actions to the new reality in Lebanon.

This was a result of many factors. In addition to initial erroneous forecasting of the length of the conflict in Syria, the development actors faced difficulties in readjusting programs, most of which were the product of detailed design and long negotiation to secure government approval. Moreover, as readily as UNDP saw the need to invest in providing support to local communities assisting refugees, it had an extremely small funding envelop to draw upon. Additionally, because Lebanon is a middle-income country, direct support to its institutions beyond technical and policy advice was often not accounted for in agency or donor program designs. Coupled with these challenges was a historically poor record of accounting by government agencies for support such as was provided for the post-2006 Israeli-Lebanese conflict reconstruction efforts.

As a consequence of these factors, the UNCT missed opportunities to unify and reorient UN agency work early on towards a resilience agenda (for support to institutions and host communities impacted by the Syrian crisis). Interventions to help institutions and communities impacted by the refugee influx were initially introduced by UNHCR in inter-

agency funding appeals for the Syria situation in 2014.¹⁰ Subsequently, UNHCR, with the support of several partners, implemented over 270 community support projects throughout the country in areas where poverty levels, refugee numbers, and tensions were high. Projects included new wells; water, sanitation and waste management facilities; community centers; improved medical facilities; youth education and sport activities; rehabilitation works; and livelihood projects.¹¹ Yet as important as these projects were, they alone could not address the serious impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon, including the refugee influx, which was far beyond humanitarian funding to address.

The extent of that impact was dramatically illustrated by the publication in September 2013 of the Economic and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon.¹² The assessment concluded that the Syrian crisis had a significant economic impact on Lebanon. Trade, tourism, consumer confidence, and investment all had fallen, contributing to a loss of government public revenue of \$1.5 billion. Moreover, increased numbers of refugees had taken a toll on public services (health and education) and infrastructure (electricity, water, sanitation, and transportation), such that Lebanon would need approximately \$2.5 billion to restore public services and infrastructure to pre-conflict levels. The report further estimated that an additional 170,000 Lebanese would be pushed into poverty.

Several months later the World Bank established a trust fund to help the Lebanese government deal with the fiscal impact of the Syrian crisis. The objective was to ensure a timely and reliable flow of international grants to finance projects that would have immediate impacts on Lebanese communities affected by the influx of Syrian refugees. Unfortunately, the trust fund failed to meet expectations in the ensuing years due to a lack of political consensus to ensure that necessary mechanisms were in place and that disbursements were made as planned.

Another relatively early partner on the development side was the European Union (EU). The EU responded quickly to UNHCR's concerns that hosting communities needed assistance to cope with the increase in arrivals of refugees. Through various funding sources, the EU financed a range of projects designed at the municipal level, including efforts to improve waste collection, water distribution, community services, and the delivery of public health. These efforts went a long way in assisting communities and lessening prospective tensions between refugees and the Lebanese. EU funding was also directed towards strengthening the capacities of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education to improve service delivery and to do so in a manner that included refugees in the provision of services.

10 During 2014 and subsequently, there were six Refugee Response Plans, i.e., regional strategy documents, with specific country chapters, designed to present an inter-agency assessment of humanitarian needs resulting from the crisis in Syria, and aiming to ensure a coherent response to those needs.

11 Funding was provided by a variety of donors including the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Kuwait, Mexico, the Russian Federation, the Said and Asfari Foundations, Saudi Arabia, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the United States (UNHCR 2014).

12 The 2013 assessment was led by the World Bank (WB) in collaboration with a number of UN agencies (notably UNDP, UNICEF and UNHCR), the European Union, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Its background can be found in 2012 discussions held between UNHCR and the WB regarding how UNHCR's data could be used together with WB expertise to analyze the economic impact of the Syrian crisis, including the impact of the refugee influx on Lebanon and the institutional support that would be needed.

These efforts by the EU, and others, started to become more entrenched in the refugee response from late 2014 onwards. Unlike the community support projects, these investments were of a larger scale and were intended to be multi-year. The benefits were particularly visible in the area of education: the Minister of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), with the support of several donor states, UNICEF, the World Bank, UNHCR, and other specialized agencies, made a concerted push to strengthen the capacity of the public school system. The ambition was twofold: to improve the quality of public education, and to expand capacity to ensure the inclusion of refugee children. The former was important since weaknesses in the public system had resulted in 75 percent of Lebanese children attending private institutions and rendering the public system populated largely by poorer children whose need for a good education was every bit as essential. The push to achieve these aims was concentrated in a new three-year program, Reaching all Children with Education (RACE) that was initiated in 2014 (MEHE 2014). RACE encompassed a combination of efforts including physical rehabilitation of schools, teacher training, accelerated learning programs, and technical support to the Ministry.

This broad-based partnership, which engaged humanitarian and development actors in an effort both to expand education to children and improve the outcomes for Lebanon, has had significant impact. Although it is too early to know whether the efforts will translate over time into longer school retention rates, and more primary and secondary graduates within refugee and Lebanese communities, the initial results were positive. Lebanon went from accommodating just 62,664 refugee children in the public system in 2013, to accommodating over 100,000 in 2015 with plans for an additional 100,000 the following year.

The refugee influx into Lebanon, particularly from 2013 onwards, focused international attention on Lebanon and the level of financial engagement by donors was much larger than existed before the crisis. While the mass arrival of refugees strained the delivery of public services, the relatively early linkages of humanitarian and development planning in the education sector helped to ensure improved outcomes for both refugees and Lebanese. It is a useful example of what is increasingly being seen as the advantages of comprehensive joined up humanitarian and development planning, which should become less of an exception and more of a rule in future responses.

By 2015, this approach was fully reflected in funding appeals which were based on meeting the needs of refugees as well as providing more robust support for Lebanese institutions.¹³ The lesson learned from Lebanon is that this joined-up humanitarian and development programming should be embarked upon early in the crisis, and extend beyond education to delivery of other critical services.

E. Funding

As funding depends on voluntary contributions, and was neither predictable nor (but for a few exceptions) multi-year, stable programming was not possible. In 2013 alone, UNHCR in Lebanon experienced nine budget increases.

¹³ The Regional Refugee and Resilience Response Plan launched in that year, which included Lebanon and other hosting countries in the region, appealed for \$4.3 billion to respond to refugee needs in the region, and \$1.75 billion for Lebanon alone.

The practical constraints of such a situation cannot be underestimated. UNHCR and partners could not be sure whether they would have the funds needed to meet very basic shelter, protection, health, and food needs throughout the year. Limited funds secured at the beginning of the year had to be planned to meet basic needs for a limited number of months, in the uncertain hope that more funding would be forthcoming, or strictly rationed from the beginning, in the hope of maintaining some thin coverage until the end of the year. The consequences were often brutal. In 2013, for example, agencies did not secure funding by mid-year to purchase materials needed to procure shelters for the winter months, which would begin when temperatures started to plummet at the end of September. When funding arrived in the last quarter, it was too late to secure all the materials necessary and distribute them to the thousands of refugees trapped by snow and freezing rain.

As the operation matured, and as the crisis in Lebanon garnered more international coverage, funding became less of a challenge insofar as agencies could plan with more certainty at the beginning of the year that the level of pledges made (which were never in excess of 50 percent of what was needed) would be followed by disbursements throughout the year. This meant that UNHCR and partners could plan with a higher level of certainty, although always with significantly less funding than what the situation demanded.

For their part, many donors were pledging amounts far above previous levels and without such support there would have been considerable loss of refugee life in Lebanon and greater instability throughout the country. At the same time, the tight earmarking of contributions meant that agencies had little flexibility to move funds from areas that were relatively well resourced to life saving interventions that were less well funded. Relatively tight earmarking of contributions also led to multiple and complicated reporting on funds received: within a donor country, different sources of funds had different reporting requirements, and no donor country had the same requirements as another.

While donors are generally sympathetic to the constraints earmarking imposes on agencies, they nonetheless continue to favor earmarking because contributions to a specific cause, such as education, allow them to show constituents concrete benefits arising from the funding, in exactly the area in which improvement was sought. Earmarking also assures them that their priorities will be met and not displaced by priorities that the recipient agency may favor. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that earmarked contributions for UNHCR in Lebanon from 2013 to 2015 grew from 52 to 62 percent of total contributions received. Meanwhile, the number of separate donor reports increased during that same period from 21 to 61.

As the number and size of donor contributions grew, naturally so too did donor interest in visiting refugees and seeing firsthand the conditions in which refugees lived, the consequences of the influx on Lebanon and the impact of their own contributions. The number of days each year that UNHCR hosted such donor missions, complete with briefings and site visits, increased from 50 in 2013 to 150 in 2015.

Another challenge faced in Lebanon, which is also present in other operations, is that donors often had bilateral agreements with many of the partners that UNHCR and other UN agencies used to implement their programs. There was little coordinated assessment of partner activity, either as between UN agencies, between UN agencies and donors, or

between donors themselves. This was unfortunate for each donor and/or agency engaging the same partner in a particular sector that had a separate review, monitoring, assessment, reporting, and auditing mechanism. This was certainly cumbersome for the partners and did not advance improved programming overall.

The limitations imposed by the lack of significant multi-year funding for humanitarian action and the constraints that are consequent upon heavily earmarked funding were recently addressed as part of the discussion of the Grand Bargain at the World Humanitarian Summit (UN Secretary-General 2016).¹⁴ The goal should be to limit earmarking, establish adequate multi-year funding whenever possible, and harmonize reporting requirements and partner assessments between donors.

F. Innovation

Increasingly donors call for, and humanitarian agencies pledge, to deliver programs more efficiently, including through innovative means. Indeed, innovative means of service delivery are coming on stream at an accelerated pace. What is very much needed is better linking of these initiatives to benefit more operations.

The response to the refugee influx in Lebanon brought together an extremely diverse array of humanitarian actors across agencies, which met regularly, formally and informally to enhance information and data analysis across all sectors. Among them was a core of extremely savvy and technologically adept national and international colleagues who, faced with constraints in program design and delivery, set about creatively to overcome them. Sometimes these efforts drew from best practices elsewhere, which were often subsequently enhanced; at other times, new means were adopted.

1. REGISTRATION USING BIOMETRICS

The move to biometric registration in Lebanon was one of the most significant enhancements to registration, needs identification, coordination, and refugee protection. Adapting the technology piloted in Jordan, UNHCR introduced biometric iris scanning as part of registration processes in late 2013. That move greatly sped up the process of registration and permitted daily and disaggregated information on arrivals and trends throughout the country. It also helped to ensure the integrity not only of UNHCR's registration data but also of the systems that depended on reliable registration data, including for assistance and resettlement. As the data was secure and linked eventually to UNHCR offices in the region, it facilitated early detection of multiple claims. The registration process was further enhanced by the development of an electronic Syrian ID card reader, which eliminated the risk of human error in transcribing a name from the ID card to the registration data base. The card reader became part of a package of efforts to strengthen the capacity of the Lebanese government that until then relied largely on manual data entry.

¹⁴ The Grand Bargain refers to a package of reforms to humanitarian funding launched at the World Humanitarian Summit. Donors and aid financing agreed to 51 commitments to make emergency aid finance more efficient and effective in order to better serve people in need ("The Grand Bargain" 2016).

2. REFUGEE ASSISTANCE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Registration data was linked to a refugee assistance and information database developed by UNHCR and known as the Refugee Assistance Information System (RAIS). RAIS is an assistance tracking and referrals database. It allows UNHCR and its partners to share information on who has been assisted and how, and what further follow-up is needed. The system is synchronized daily with the registration system. Refugees consent to having their data shared with only those partners who sign a data sharing agreement with UNHCR and meet data security protocols. The system dramatically reduces the chance of duplication of assessments, reduces the risks of overlap in partner activities, and improves the delivery of services to refugees by facilitating the ability of partners to monitor whether assistance has been provided to persons in need of it and whether referrals to appropriate services have been made.

Beyond the tracking of assistance provided to individual refugees and households, RAIS is also used in post-distribution monitoring to assess the status and changes in expenditure patterns and coping strategies of refugees. This is done through household visits using a RAIS mobile data collection solution. The mobile data solution was also applied to taking case histories and referral of persons to specific services, and for ongoing monitoring including as a means to track school enrollment. In large operations like the Lebanese one, RAIS also permits humanitarian actors to respond to inquiries from refugees, and to provide them with up to date information on whether they have been determined to be eligible for assistance and whether they have been registered with UNHCR.

3. ELECTRONIC REPORTING

As the number of partners and donors grew, consistent reporting became a serious issue. Multiple sectors and agencies were using different means and different time periods to report on their assessments and their activities. This was creating confusion and inhibiting a clearer picture of needs, interventions, and gaps. To address this problem, an open source tool called Activity Info, first piloted by UNICEF and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was adapted to the Lebanon context. All partners were trained in its use. Partner reports were henceforth streamlined into a single electronic database, using harmonized data sets and with predictable frequency. The tool significantly enhanced coordination by permitting the tracking of agencies' activities throughout the country and the identification of areas and needs that had yet to be met. Activity Info is one of the most significant data management tools and one that should be employed in other emergency and large operation settings.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND CONSOLIDATION

In the early years of the emergency, most field data was collected by hand, using paper, clipboards, and Excel spreadsheets. Data clerks then had to be employed to encode the data into databases, so that the data could be analyzed. Within a couple of years, this methodology gave way to mobile data collection using open source software. The data collected was automatically linked to the relevant sector-based database. This enhanced efficiency and improved reliability and analysis.

Moreover, just as Activity Info harmonized and facilitated agency reporting and coordination, so too did the application of Spongebase, developed for the Lebanon context by UNHCR and UNICEF. Spongebase provides a means to automatically collate information from different data sources and aggregate them onto a web-based map. Prior to its use, agencies received only a partial view of data, given that multiple databases and data sets were being used and were not pulled together and linked to geographic areas so as to provide a consolidated overview.

Significant time and effort can be saved, coordination enhanced, and analysis improved with the use of such data management and analysis tools early in an emergency.

5. CASH-BASED PROGRAMMING

While cash-based programming is often cited as an example of innovative programming, the use of cash to meet needs is neither particularly new nor innovative. Its expanded use in addressing refugee needs, however, is relatively recent. The advantages of properly designed and monitored cash-based programming include: cost effectiveness; the empowerment of recipients by enabling them to determine what to prioritize given their specific needs; the provision of a more dignified means of receiving help compared to receiving in-kind assistance; benefits to local markets and economies; and a reduction in fraud.

The use of cash in Lebanon to provide assistance for refugees had always been rather modest. In the early days of the Syrian crisis, the WFP introduced a food voucher system, but it was not until much later in the crisis that some agencies tested the use of cash cards as an alternative means of delivering assistance. Cash-based programming through multi-purpose cash cards had already been successfully implemented in Jordan, but its introduction in Lebanon met with initial resistance from the government on the grounds that poor Lebanese would resent cash being provided to refugees. This reticence was overcome in large part due to the willingness to link cash-based programming to improvements to Lebanon's National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP). Specifically, with technical guidance from the World Bank, an emergency project was launched to expand and improve the social assistance package of the NPTP, including to those affected by the Syrian crisis (World Bank 2014).¹⁵

The greater reliance on cash-based programming through the use of multi-purpose cash cards in Lebanon proved to be a boon and would have helped even more if it had been initiated earlier. For example, investment in communal shelters made sense initially when refugee numbers were small and seemingly temporary. But their use proved difficult as problems were encountered in ensuring proper site management by partners and refugees and in maintaining good relations with surrounding communities. Such investment ultimately proved unsustainable given the relatively high cost of maintaining communal shelters amidst burgeoning shelter needs which could not be met by the extremely limited number of sites available for collective accommodation. An early recourse to cash for rent, in hindsight, would have been a better option. In addition, the provision of winter assistance initially in kind, and later through partial reliance on fuel vouchers, turned out to be very problematic as the numbers grew. The use of fuel vouchers left agencies open to

15 An additional financing grant was sought in June 2016 from the World Bank.

intimidation by petrol suppliers who wanted to be included in the scheme but did not meet the selection criteria. Moreover, vouchers also left refugees open to intimidation by gangs who insisted that they sell the vouchers for less than the face value. Finally, some types of in-kind shelter support, such as weatherproofing materials, were excessively costly in terms of warehousing and transportation expenses. Winter support was more sustainable and better able to meet needs when in-kind support was selectively provided — for example, for high efficiency and safe heaters of good quality that were obtained through established and competitive suppliers.

Reaching more harmonized approaches by WFP, UNHCR, and several NGOs was complex given that initially they used different methodologies to determine needs, and provided cash for different purposes (food, shelter, multi-use) and in different formats (vouchers, cash cards). Moreover, the move to cash cards entailed complicated negotiations with banks, technological interfaces to link registration and eligibility data with cash delivery, monitoring mechanisms and most importantly, a common means for determining — across agencies and amongst donors — the criteria to determine who was entitled to such support and at what level.

Through prolonged and exacting negotiations, a common methodology was agreed upon to address these issues. In the first instance, a statistical model was applied to the information gathered during registration in order to predict the needs of a household. This was followed with information gathered by sectoral specialists through their visits, which could indicate higher or lower levels of vulnerability upon which eligibility would be adjusted. In short, collective action was brought to bear on a situation-specific challenge, one which UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF and partners are examining further as they explore employing joined and single-cash delivery systems elsewhere.

G. Accountability

Humanitarians must remain accountable to those they seek to assist. It is not sufficient solely to assess needs and deliver assistance. Assistance must be informed by what refugees feel they need and can use, and their feedback on the utility of humanitarian efforts must be communicated to improve responses. While achieving such accountability is important in operations of all sizes, it is especially challenging in large operations like Lebanon, with sizable and dispersed beneficiary populations.

For many years, UNHCR has been using participatory assessments, which include holding separate discussions with women, men, girls, and boys in order to gather accurate information on the specific problems they face and also to hear their proposed solutions. Participatory assessments help to ensure that humanitarian action reflects refugees' priorities and that refugees are able to contribute to the design, modification, and implementation of efforts.

Print and electronic media (flyers, posters, signs, and videos) are standard forms of communication at registration centers, community centers, health clinics, and elsewhere to deliver important information regarding protection, service availability, public health, fraud prevention, and response messages. UNHCR has also developed specific websites for refugees that convey all manner of information needed to address refugee concerns

and provide advice regarding available services. Refugees can rate the usefulness of the information provided and suggest means to improve it. In addition, in Lebanon, radios were distributed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNHCR, and a weekly radio program for refugees was used to supplement other information-sharing efforts.

Relying on refugees to assist in program delivery was also hugely valuable in ensuring that the humanitarian response was optimally directed at real needs. In Lebanon, where refugees were spread across 1,700 locations, it was difficult to ensure timely access to all locations. The Refugee Outreach Program was designed to engage up to 1,000 refugees to provide specialized information to refugee communities in the areas of health, education, law, and child protection. Refugees engaged in these efforts often have pre-existing training in specialized areas, but also receive specialized support. In Lebanon, they received induction training on the situation in the country, the humanitarian response, UNHCR's code of conduct, and protection and humanitarian principles. They circulated regularly in their communities, providing advice and referring refugees in need to specialized services. They met weekly with UNHCR and partner agencies, and received updates on the latest information and stipends for their services.

Reliance on refugees for outreach greatly improved communication with refugee communities, and led to more persons at risk coming forward to seek advice and help. It also helped to ensure that agencies had up-to-date information about refugees' concerns, which was especially vital in communities that, due to security threats, were out of bounds for most humanitarian workers. Moreover, the program benefits the refugees it engages, who appreciate the evident impact their involvement has and the useful employment of their time and talents.

A relatively simple but useful tool that was developed in the Lebanon operation was a two-way instant messaging system to advise refugees on their eligibility for assistance. Refugees in Lebanon had access to mobile phones and could opt to receive messages from UNHCR on their phones. This was especially useful in communicating time-sensitive information regarding changes in government policy and other important information. A system was developed to enable refugees to contact UNHCR by instant message regarding their eligibility for assistance and to receive an immediate automated response.

The recognition over time of the need for multiple means to ensure open and informed communication lines with refugees was an important development in the Lebanon refugee response. It is another lesson learned: to maximize the breadth of communication lines, complementary tools should be launched at the outset and not rolled out consecutively.

H. Local Partnerships

Lebanon had no shortage of national NGOs or civil society groups responding to the refugee crisis. There were over 8,000 such groups registered with the authorities, with approximately 1,000 registered groups actively involved in providing assistance to refugees (BRD 2015). A core set of local NGOs had long worked as implementing partners for UNHCR and other agencies in responding to the needs of Iraqi refugees prior to the

Syrian crisis. Like everyone else, however, national NGOs were challenged by the scale of the Syrian refugee influx and it was extremely difficult for them to scale up quickly and ensure that the financial and accountability controls necessary for expanded partnerships with UN agencies were in place. Moreover, for some, complying with these requirements proved to be a problem that could not be easily remedied, as the requirements (demanded by international accounting practices and auditing regulations) were quite burdensome.

The result was that international NGOs dominated the scene for the initial years. When the situation escalated so quickly, there was insufficient time to invest sufficiently in the needed capacity building of national partners. This started to change when the refugee inflows subsided. In 2015, UNHCR introduced a system of area mentoring, whereby experienced international implementing partners, as part of their agreements with UNHCR, worked alongside national NGOs under what were known colloquially as “umbrella agreements.” The idea was that over time the national NGOs would replace the international NGOs in implementation, once the former’s implementation and financial control accountabilities were strengthened.

The lesson learned, which also saw expression in the commitments arising from the World Humanitarian Summit of May 2016, is for greater reliance on national partners. This means investing in capacity building prior to crisis, including through the use of “umbrella agreements” and evaluating their effectiveness over time.

It is important to note, however, that the Lebanon experience pointed to instances where direct contracting through the private sector also proved beneficial. For example, Lebanon suffered from a lack of clean drinking water in areas of high refugee concentrations. This was due, in part, to weak water supply networks that suffered excessive loss because of old and leaking pipes, as well as to increases in demand. With financing from the EU, and technical support from the Swiss Development Corporation, UNHCR worked with private Lebanese companies, the Ministry of Water and Energy and local water establishments, for the construction of new water wells and storage tanks, and for the replacement of water supply networks. The project (with initial funding of €14 million) sought to bring clean water supply to over 11,000 homes upon completion.

By and large, the engagement of the private sector in the Lebanon refugee response in the early years was not robust. Subsequent years have seen much greater engagement. Today, there are multiple fora seeking to harness not just the funding potential of the private sector, but, even more importantly, to forge partnerships for humanitarian action in new and creative ways.¹⁶

16 UNHCR is investing in innovative approaches with its partners. UNHCR’s Innovation Unit collaborates with UNHCR divisions, refugees, academia, and the private sector to creatively address complex refugee challenges (see <http://www.unhcr.org/innovation/>). See also the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants, G.A. Res. 71/1, U.N. Doc A/RES/71/1 (Oct. 3, 2016), Annex 1, which establishes the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRR). This will engage a wide array of stakeholders and include both humanitarian responses and development actions. It embraces private sector engagement, diverse forms of investment, and innovative humanitarian delivery: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/events/conferences/57e39d987/new-york-declaration-refugees-migrants.html>.

IV. Conclusion

Since the onset of the refugee influx in Lebanon, there have already been a number of developments which bode well for ensuring more effective emergency responses. First, the whole model of contingency planning has been reviewed and replaced by what is turning out to be a better means to prepare for crisis than what was used in the early years of the Syria conflict. The new model gives agencies an enhanced means of doing scenario planning that is not constrained by political considerations. This in turn can help to ensure that the standby arrangements for staffing, program delivery, and financial management are in place before a planning scenario takes effect.

Significantly, as well, is that the divide between development and humanitarian action is, at least theoretically, dissolving, with more states, development actors, and financial institutions recognizing the need to shore up public institutions, services, and infrastructure earlier in an emergency to meet the needs of refugees and hosting communities. This should lead to humanitarian responses that are complemented by development ones — conjoined action rather than consecutive action, which has been the situation in the past. While the United Nations will continue to be a large player in the humanitarian sphere, it will need to partner more alongside much larger development partners for better outcomes for refugees and their hosts. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, adopted by the UN General Assembly as part of the New York Declaration of 2016, is a promising blueprint.¹⁷

Another positive development has been the increased interest in and appetite for the use of innovative technologies to help provide assistance in cost-effective ways. In Lebanon, such innovations enhanced data collection, brought new means of communication and learning to refugees, and improved needs assessments, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. If there is a weakness here, it is in the sharing of such innovative measures in ways that operations around the world can benefit. And while these new technologies are assisting in inter-agency coordination, the United Nations could revise its own processes to ensure they are streamlined, non-duplicative, and engage a wider set of partners.

Just as the United Nations could positively rationalize its coordination processes, emergency responses would be enhanced with efforts by donors to streamline their reporting requirements, coordinate more on partner assessments, provide more flexible and multi-year funding, and join up their humanitarian and development programming. These ambitions are prominent in the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, with some also reflected in commitments found in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.

At the local level, more needs to be done to ensure that humanitarian agencies fully understand the full range of relevant accountabilities and responsibilities from central to local authorities, and that there is an appropriate level of engagement with both. UN agencies have recently pledged to invest in local partners (for example, in discussions during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit). Efforts underway to move forward on these matters with NGOs and private sector partners need to be shared and evaluated. Enhanced engagement of beneficiaries is already a tried and tested means for achieving appropriate program design and delivery, but lessons and best practices still need to be more widely shared.

¹⁷ New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, Annex 1.

Finally, the best planned emergency refugee response is one that never needs to get off the ground because the anticipated causes for flight are mitigated and safety and security restored. The fact that the Syrian crisis has extended as long as it has, with such devastating effect on individual lives, the country and the region, speaks to the enormous international deficit in conflict prevention and mitigation. None of the lessons covered in this paper address that deficit, nor will remedying the gaps identified above solve this most difficult foundational problem.

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