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The untapped resource: Protecting and leveraging refugee social capital in protracted displacement

Lebanon is hosting the highest per capita refugee population in the world, estimated to comprise around a quarter of the country's residents. Despite multifaceted donor assistance, Syrian refugees in Lebanon face an ongoing deterioration in their socio-economic conditions. This brief argues that in these challenging circumstances, refugees rely to a great extent on their social capital to manage their experience of protracted displacement. Social capital is often the sole remaining asset that refugees have at their disposal to access livelihoods or cost-saving measures, or to use as a form of social safety net. As a result, social capital increases refugees' resilience and improves the effectiveness of aid. Conversely, a lack of social capital can make individuals and families more vulnerable. The brief makes recommendations to all key actors in refugee responses on the ways they could identify, help maintain and leverage refugees' social capital for improving the lived experience of protracted displacement.

Introduction

With more than half of the world's refugees in protracted displacement with little prospect for return or resettlement,¹ the search is on for response strategies that will help both the displaced and their host communities to weather the challenges created by these circumstances. It often seems that the existing playbook of emergency interventions, and the vocabulary in which protracted refugee crises are discussed, struggle to address the nature

of these challenges and the consequent destruction of so much human potential.

Research conducted by Clingendael Conflict Research Unit (CRU) among Syrian refugees in Lebanon in the second half of 2017² suggests that the concept of resilience – and specifically the role social capital plays in refugee resilience – can offer new means of understanding the experience of protracted displacement and new ways

1 Return and resettlement are two out of three durable solutions for forced displacement. The third, local integration, remains controversial across many refugee-hosting countries. Some, like Lebanon, have explicitly rejected it as an option available to refugees they are currently hosting.

2 The 6-month-long research into response mechanisms of Syrian refugees in Lebanon was conducted with funding from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery (NPL) and in cooperation with a number of Dutch and international aid agencies operating in Lebanon.

of tailoring interventions to address this experience in Lebanon and beyond.

Our main overarching finding is that social capital is one of the key resources that refugees have at their disposal to help them navigate and manage the experience of protracted displacement, and that more could be done by all actors – host countries, international donors and the aid community – in order to (i) facilitate the creation and maintenance of social capital; (ii) capture it in various tools used to plan and design aid interventions; and (iii) design aid interventions that leverage refugees' existing social capital and create a conducive environment for safeguarding and increasing it.

Resource depletion

For over seven years, the Middle East has been the stage of the world's largest displacement crisis since the Second World War. The Syrian war has pushed over 5.4 million people out of the country and over 6 million into internal displacement.³ The brunt of the refugee crisis has been borne by Syria's three immediate neighbours: Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. The smallest among them, Lebanon, hosts the largest per capita refugee population in the world. With just under one million registered and around 500,000 unregistered Syrian refugees it is estimated that one in every four of the country's residents is a refugee.⁴

This massive displacement is taking place in a country with a precarious confessional political structure, built around three main religious groups – Sunni and Shi'a Muslims as well as Christians.⁵ Lebanon's political system relies on the presumed demographic balance between these groups. The presence of large numbers of mainly Sunni refugees represents, in the eyes of the political elite, a potential danger not just to the country's economy and a burden on its already weak public services, but also a threat to the power-sharing arrangements that have underpinned the country's relative stability in the past two decades.

The national and international aid response in Lebanon has been shaped to a large extent by these circumstances. Fearing the consequences of protracted Syrian displacement, the Lebanese authorities have made it nearly impossible for refugees to claim or renew legal stay. This has had profound consequences for the refugees' safety, freedom of movement and also their ability to maintain their livelihoods,⁶ resulting in 76% of registered Syrian refugees finding themselves under national poverty line in 2017 – as shown in the graph below.

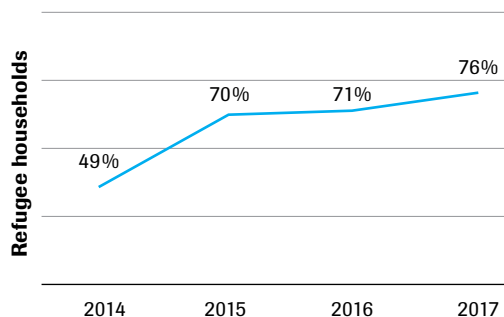
3 See: <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> [Last accessed on July 10, 2018]

4 See: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122> [Last accessed on July 10, 2018]; The figure of 1.5 million total Syrian refugees has been officially endorsed by the Government of Lebanon in the 2018 update of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), see: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/LCRP2018_EN_Full_180122.pdf [Last accessed on July 10, 2018]; Lebanon also hosts 174,000 Palestinian refugees. See: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/Dec-21/431109-census-finds-174422-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon.ashx> [Last accessed on July 10, 2018]

5 The majority of Lebanese Christians are Maronite, but there are many other smaller denominations, including Greek Orthodox, several denominations of Armenian Christians, etc.

6 Obtaining residency permit does not automatically confer right to work, as refugees are required to take additional steps (such as obtaining a work permit) before they are legally allowed to work in Lebanon. The link between access to residency and access to livelihoods has been explored in detail in the two surveys by done by University of Saint Joseph in Beirut: Al Sharabati, C. and Nammour, J. (2015) *Survey in Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*, Institut des Sciences Politiques, Université Saint Joseph and Al Sharabati, C. and Nammour, J. (2017) *Perception of Security among Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Communities: Are things getting better or worse?*, Institut des Sciences Politiques, Université Saint Joseph.

Figure 1 Syrian refugee households in Lebanon living below the poverty line⁷



The Government of Lebanon (GoL) has also tried – with mixed results – to control the housing arrangements for refugees and aid flows, or determine the interventions that the aid community can engage in. The GoL has for instance never allowed for the establishment of formal refugee settlements. It has also limited the scope of interventions available to aid agencies and donors: fearing that any kind of access to livelihoods would result in refugees settling permanently in Lebanon, the authorities have for many years restricted livelihoods and cash-based programmes.⁸ The resulting policies and practices have stimulated a set of negative coping responses among many Syrian refugees – including poor nutrition habits, taking on high levels of debt, acceptance of abysmal working conditions, early marriage and child labour.⁹

The agreements reached at the 2016 London Conference¹⁰ and the signing of the EU Compact¹¹ later that year seemed to have

shifted the field somewhat, opening new development funding channels to support Lebanon's capacity to host refugees. The key aid donors also conditioned their financial commitments to Lebanon on liberalisation of restrictions on refugees' legal stay and aid agencies' menu of interventions. Three years on, however, the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon appears to have worsened even in comparison to low socio-economic indicators captured in 2015. The donors' interventions do not appear to have resulted in a tangible improvement of refugees' legal, social or economic circumstances.

In the summer and autumn of 2017, CRU researchers – assisted by the Lebanese American University (LAU) – conducted a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) among Syrian refugees across Lebanon, followed by on-site visits and in-depth interviews with selected families. Two main variables were established for selecting communities for focus groups: (i) the levels of social acceptance of the refugees by the host community (as an indicator of potential for developing human or social capital); and (ii) the availability of economic opportunities (as an indicator of accessibility of natural, financial and manufactured capital).

In our initial focus group discussions we tried to capture the state of the four key capitals at refugees' disposal: material, financial, social and human. The findings tailed well with the existing quantitative surveys,¹² corroborating the depletion of refugees' assets across the board. One finding however contrasted with this overall picture of decline: we found that refugees do have, and in some cases are managing to create, significant new social capital. That social capital is often their most important asset, safety net and a key tool for managing the challenges of protracted displacement.

7 UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR), 2017, pg. 60.
 8 The issue of high-level national policymaking and control of funding flows is complex and we will present it at length in a separate report on the political economy of the Lebanese refugee response.
 9 For data on indebtedness and main coping strategies see VASyR 2017, pg. 62 and pgs. 77-80.
 10 See: <https://www.supportingsyria2016.com/> [Last accessed on July 10, 2018]
 11 See: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/lebanon-compact.pdf> [Last accessed on July 10, 2018]

12 Especially important were the annual WFP Vulnerability Assessments of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) for 2015-2017 as well as two surveys on refugee perception done by the University of Saint Joseph in Beirut and already listed.

Defined as “resources embedded in social networks”,¹³ social capital seems to be the only capital that can be created even in situations of relative vulnerability, and then exchanged for access to livelihoods, cost-saving measures or used as a form of basic “social insurance”. Two types of social capital are especially important for these purposes:

- **bonding capital** between the members of a refugee group – be they residents of an informal tented settlement, or individual families living in the same urban or rural environment
- **bridging capital**: the connections between individual refugees and Lebanese citizens, who can act as employers, landlords, legal guarantors (although this relationship can often be highly exploitative) or local (I)NGO staff, who can assist with access to resources in the aid response

Finding One: The convertible capital

Even though their flight from Syria disturbed their old support systems, many refugees have been able to revive and grow their social networks in displacement. Refugees have often used their pre-existing social networks to choose a location where they can enjoy social and economic support.

This is how we encountered some strong ethnic/kinship clusters. In Bourj Hammoud we came across a tightly knit community of Syrian Kurdish refugees who influenced each other’s choices of settlement inside Lebanon and either received advice about where to settle or were able to extend such advice to others. In the small Sunni community of Hebbariyeh in the predominantly Shi’a-controlled South of Lebanon, it was news of the high acceptance of opposition-minded conservative Sunnis that convinced a number of refugees from the wider Damascus area to settle in this remote part of the country.

Once settled, refugees typically restored contacts with relatives – some of whom also fled to Lebanon – and established new relationships with other refugees, aid actors and Lebanese citizens. The Beka'a Valley and Akkar in the north originally exerted a relatively strong pull factor for a number of reasons: pre-existing connections established through seasonal agricultural labour migration to both regions, the availability of cheap housing, and the availability of seasonal or manual jobs. Several years into the response, however, this started changing. Nowadays it is through the new in-group social networks that the refugees we met were able to identify new locations with better employment opportunities and/or lower housing costs, and move inside Lebanon.

For Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the restoration of social capital serves several significant functions. First, refugees create something of a security net by pooling their resources. With half the refugees subsisting below the threshold of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket, even slight fluctuations in access to resources can pose a serious threat to their wellbeing, forcing them to rely on their networks to smooth out such crises. Examples of this include the practice of communal cooking and emotional support in times of personal crisis, as witnessed in Bourj Hammoud, or liaising with aid actors to ensure emergencies are rapidly reported to the appropriate organisations, as witnessed in Akkar or Beka'a.

Besides offering valuable support in times of crisis, social capital also provides opportunities for improving livelihoods. Refugees who have access to information- and favour-sharing networks increase their chances of finding paid work, identify cost-saving opportunities for important goods and services and garner support from individuals who can pull strings on their behalf. This is perhaps the most important function of the bridging capital noted across all locations – and an indicator of its crucial importance in accessing livelihoods. It is also a resource that is shared more commonly than expected. Refugees with access to Lebanese employers often invite members of their social networks, be it cousins or newly

13 Lin, N. (1999a) Building a Network Theory of Social Capital, *Connections*, 22(1), 28-51.

acquired friends, to join them in accessing any additional labour opportunities that arise. Refugees with mutually non-competing skills (e.g. a repairman and an IT specialist in Hebbariyeh) can exchange their “client base”.

Social capital also helps refugees to optimise their use of the limited resources and opportunities to which they have access. They may, for instance, be able to slash rents by moving, or look after each other’s children, allowing parents to work. All refugees interviewed in Hebbariyeh found affordable accommodation through contacts with the Lebanese they met after their displacement. In Akkar, we came across people finding out about more affordable accommodation through their in-group network. This phenomenon is inevitably individual and small-scale, but it also seems to be common and to have a lasting positive impact on those whose social networks manage to produce such solutions. Social capital may also strengthen the position of people facing exploitation, as their in-group networks could warn them of particularly exploitative or unreliable employers or landlords.

One important tool for increasing social capital is the smartphone.¹⁴ Most refugee households have at least one, which they use to keep in touch with family members, friends, NGOs and employers. It enables them to break out of the geographical and social isolation in which many of them, whether rural or urban, languish. Most importantly, it permits direct lines of communication between refugees and potential employers, enabling them to communicate about work opportunities and coordinate the time and place of work. In all focus groups, when asked to name the most important material objects in their possession, all the respondents named their smartphones, on a par with their Syrian ID,

UNHCR registration, and – for those who had it – bank cards used to purchase groceries on WFP food vouchers.

Social capital is arguably the most convertible capital at refugees’ disposal – but refugees’ ability to both create and convert their social capital into tangible benefits varied greatly across locations and appeared to depend on the extent to which refugees had other resources to share or invest in the first place.

It should be noted that social networks may benefit people who are part of the privileged social circle at the expense of those who are not, diverting aid and employment opportunities towards a select few. A more detailed illustration of these risks is presented in Box 1.

But our research strongly suggests that refugees’ social capital is overall a positive resource, which deserves to be taken seriously. In a country where official support systems are insufficient, refugees rely on social contacts to find their way. Increased social capital seems to strengthen safety nets, improve labour market matching, increase social and economic bargaining power and improve information channels. As a result, it may offer opportunities to improve livelihoods or at least limit their erosion.

Finding Two: Social capital as indicator of refugee wellbeing

While the story of social capital may offer a glimmer of hope by explaining many refugees’ remarkable resilience, in places where vulnerability was higher and immediate needs trumped any consideration of future benefits, in-group social networks appeared to break down completely. As refugees came to regard each other as direct competitors rather than potential supporters, their ability to share information and jointly benefit from opportunities disappeared. We noticed this phenomenon in Beka’a at the community level, and in Akkar and Hebbariyeh in particularly impoverished refugee households. In all cases the patterns

¹⁴ A detailed illustration of this process and especially the role of smartphones in rebuilding social capital is offered in the upcoming CRU Policy Brief “*Apping to resilience: How smartphones help Syrian refugees in Lebanon negotiate the precarity of displacement*”.

Box 1: Social capital in informal tented settlements

Aid workers we encountered occasionally mentioned the pernicious role that informal kinship and patronage networks can play in the delivery of aid to refugee communities. This negative interaction between aid delivery and social networks was mostly visible in informal tented settlements, where relations between the aid community and refugees were often negotiated through an informal camp manager or *shaweesh*, who wielded power over informal social networks within settlements.

While noting this phenomenon, we have not explored it in depth, partly because these interactions are relatively well documented and aid agencies are increasingly taking them into consideration when programming; and partly because tented settlements house only around 20% of the overall refugee population, while our focus was broader and included also response mechanisms of the 80% of refugee population living in individual urban and peri-urban accommodations.

Tented settlements were also the place where aid interventions ran the highest risk of inadvertently damaging in-group social capital. In these closed settings, individual refugees were able to observe which households received which kind of assistance, but due to the structural intransparency of targeting criteria used by key aid agencies, they were also unable to understand the reasoning behind targeting that they considered unjust, or address perceived unfairness through any formal complaint mechanism.

This, we observed, occasionally led to internal tensions and erosion of in-group social capital. That said, the necessity to keep targeting criteria confidential is well documented in many aid interventions and remains an important element of any targeting exercise. We have therefore made a conscious choice not to pay disproportionate attention to a phenomenon which is already well documented – and try instead to focus the resources at our disposal on observing the less understood role that social capital plays in places where refugees rely mainly on each other and individual members of their host community, and where availability of assistance is lower and/or less visible.

looked similar: the effort required to make ends meet resulted in a gradual atrophy of social connections and, with it, the disappearance of social security.

As one refugee in Beka'a – where a large number of refugees competed for the same low-paid agricultural jobs – explained: *“We do not have time to take care of each other... We do not even have time to talk to each other anymore”*. In Hebbariyeh, where social acceptance of refugees is very high, the most vulnerable family we met was also the one with the most damaged in-group social network. This nuclear family had first-degree relatives among the community's refugees on the side of both parents. Yet the fact that the men in those families were all competing

for the same scarce manual agricultural labour and struggled with similar problems of indebtedness and chronic disease led to a breakdown of family ties. Initially, the men across the family stopped talking to each other due to work competition. Slowly, the ties between the women broke down, too. *“I hardly speak to my sister anymore”*, the mother of the family explained. *“It's all hardship, we have nothing to talk about.”* The only social resources this family had left were bridging ones – Lebanese contacts, such as grocers willing to extend credit, teachers supporting children in school, and the local religious charity. But the parents felt that the absence of in-group support severely undermined their capacity to raise their family.

This “meltdown” of in-group social capital, we found, is a sign of extreme vulnerability. Although, as discussed earlier, bridging capital towards the host community or representatives of the aid sector is key in terms of access to livelihoods, loans and housing, in-group social capital is just as important. It evens out daily fluctuations and acts as a kind of insurance policy. Social connections help cover periods of unemployment or sickness, childcare needs, or offer emotional support in times of difficulties, maintaining a household’s assets at a basic level that allows their replenishment later on.

Meltdown of this kind of capital severely undermines refugees’ capacity to recover from catastrophic events and “bounce back”. It also increases the likelihood refugees will revert to highly negative coping mechanisms such as begging, prostitution, or unsafe returns.

In practical terms, this means that a household’s levels of vulnerability are both a symptom and – through a negative feedback loop –also a cause of social network meltdown. Such meltdown is therefore also an important practical indicator of a household’s extreme vulnerability. For this reason, when social isolation is added to poverty more urgent, or more specific interventions, may be required to bring a household back to the point where they would be able to rebuild their social capital as a form of basic “insurance policy”.

The untapped resource

Our research indicates that social capital is an important piece of the vulnerability puzzle, which remains overlooked in larger-scale operational interventions. Social capital is implicitly taken into account in specialised small-scale interventions such as individual case-management or psycho-social support projects, for instance through assessments of the strength of refugees’ social support networks. However in our research into existing large-scale vulnerability and needs

assessments, we have come across only sporadic attempts by United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to capture and use household social capital in their assessments – by looking at indicators such as homogeneity of refugee communities, or density of social networks.

This means that households with similar levels of vulnerability, but living in very different social landscapes, may often receive similar kinds of “social-capital-blind” assistance. For a household enjoying strong social support, such aid may be sufficient to overcome a period of high vulnerability and rebuild a degree of self-sufficiency. For a household facing social isolation, however, such assistance may be insufficient to prevent a further slide into poverty and deterioration of their response mechanisms. There is also little understanding of which interventions are required for households with low social capital to rebuild the networks they need to access livelihoods or support.

While this would be out of place in the initial stages of displacement, in situations of protracted displacement social capital becomes an important element of refugees’ existence, which warrants its inclusion into needs assessments and targeting criteria. Capturing social capital at the household level could help design, tailor and guide interventions towards those in especially high need, helping lead them back to the path of self-support.

Social capital should also be taken into account when designing interventions. It could be leveraged to ensure improved access to livelihoods, funds or cost-cutting measures as well as to improve levels of protection and social cohesion.

Our conclusions therefore address these two broad issues: (i) how to measure social capital in vulnerability surveys and needs assessments, as well as the (ii) ways to include it in design and implementation of operational interventions.

Recommendations

The key overarching tool that is used to measure vulnerability among aid recipients in Lebanon is the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian refugees or VASyR, jointly designed and implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP), UNHCR and UNICEF. The Lebanese government, aid agencies and donors systematically use VASyR as the key source of statistical information for designing aid strategies and interventions. VASyR does not entirely overlook social capital, but instead approaches it as “status-related”. That is, it assumes that low social capital is a function of specific demographic profiles (female-headed households, persons with disabilities, unaccompanied children, etc). While such profiles often indicate low social capital, our research shows that low social capital is situational rather than status-related, often affecting households that do not fall under any of those profiles. On the basis of this research we have found such status-based approach insufficient to cover the full complexity of social capital patterns in protracted displacements, and hence inadequate to direct funding where it is most needed.

1) Include household-level situational social capital in the main vulnerability and needs assessment tools

The UN, donors and implementing agencies should design cost-effective ways to capture and include social capital in VASyR and all other large surveys and measurement instruments of refugees’ needs or practices.

The main challenge is to design a precise yet not too cumbersome set of questions to capture the levels of social capital and its role in a household’s vulnerability. Such exercises in quantification of social capital are complex and costly, and require a strong methodological base that is likely to be found mainly in academic institutions. We would like to encourage the aid sector as well as academia to look for opportunities to collaborate around these issues, and try to find the ways to capture social capital and its fluctuations among refugees as cost-effectively as possible.

2) Capture and include social capital in specific sectoral and project needs assessments

Regardless of how far social capital can be measured by VASyR, other implementing agencies should be encouraged to design and pilot effective ways to capture and include social capital in their sectoral and project needs assessments, and use those findings to tailor interventions and/or prioritise affected households. Just as with the surveys outlined in this report, these indicators should be an addition to the already tested needs assessments, and as coherent across various sectors and projects as possible.

3) Make current methodologies and assessments available to the aid community

Two existing assessments are of particular interest here in terms of potential learning: the participatory assessments UNHCR uses as the starting point of its annual programming, as well as UNHCR-funded and INGO-implemented protection monitoring that looks at intra-community cohesion at the level of specific communities. While some findings of this research are occasionally presented to the aid community, neither are fully shared. Sharing and understanding the methodology used in these surveys could be a good starting point for the aid community’s efforts to develop this concept and to put it into practice.

4) Include social capital in targeting criteria

Two large-scale interventions in Lebanon are especially important from the point of view of inclusion of social capital in the targeting criteria: the WFP-implemented food assistance programme and the basic assistance (e.g. multipurpose) cash programme. These key cash-based interventions present a lifeline for many refugee households. The targeting of the most vulnerable households has not been based on household surveys, but on a desk formula that is being updated annually based on the results of VASyR. In our view the findings of this research call for a discussion on whether social capital could be included in the desk formula to determine vulnerability at household level/eligibility for “social-capital-based” assistance.

5) Develop and pilot intervention strategies that are capable of leveraging the existing refugee social capital or have the potential to create new one

In terms of other types of assistance, and based on the surveys discussed in this report, donors and agencies should also consider developing and piloting intervention strategies that are capable of leveraging existing in-group social capital in order to ensure the resilience of refugee social networks. Specifically it would be worthwhile to look at livelihood interventions such as community-based pooling of funds to be used for assistance to the most vulnerable members, community-based savings and loans, community-based micro-credits, etc.

It would also be important to look at the interventions that have the potential to create or strengthen both bonding and bridging capital towards host communities: interventions such as community-based protection or collective site management and coordination (CSMC), as applied in both tented settlements and urban environments. Another potential route to explore would be strengthening or scaling up the existing approaches that foster intercommunity contacts/interactions and contribute to creating bridging capital.




6) Do no harm – also to social capital

As a minimum, there is a need to apply the do-no-harm principle when it comes to social capital. There is already a documented need to further improve the conflict sensitivity of aid distribution, and especially food vouchers. On the basis of this research, the aid community should also try to avoid interventions that separate closely-knit communities or extended families, or separate refugees from their existing bridging contacts, as this could have a harmful net effect on targeted households.

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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