

Briefing

Policy and planning; Urban

Keywords:

Forced displacement, refugees, rural-urban linkages, urban crises, livelihoods



Protracted displacement in an urban world

Issue date
December 2023

Policy pointers

Donor agencies and humanitarian organisations must conduct cost-benefit analyses of their humanitarian spending in camps on priority areas of care to evaluate the effectiveness of the encampment policy.

Donor agencies and humanitarian organisations must invest in researching, designing and piloting new approaches to supporting urban refugees.

The government of Jordan should facilitate long-term residence status for Syrian refugees to better support their wellbeing and livelihood outcomes.

The government of Jordan should allow Syrian refugees to register micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises to reduce the risk of exploitation and support economic growth.

A decade on: improving outcomes for Syrian refugees in Jordan

Our research with Syrian refugees in Jordan shows that current humanitarian and government responses are limiting refugees' wellbeing and livelihoods. Jordan currently hosts more than 600,000 Syrian refugees. In camps, humanitarian aid focuses on supporting bodily wellbeing, but residents in Zaatari camp score low on healthcare, shelter and food indicators, and mobility restrictions limit their livelihoods. Refugees in Amman score lower than camp refugees on some wellbeing indicators. They lack access to humanitarian services and struggle with work permits and residency restrictions. Nevertheless, they contribute to Jordan's economy through their spending and entrepreneurship. Syrian refugees in Jordan's camps and cities face an uncertain future. It is time to re-evaluate humanitarian and governmental responses to protracted displacement and devise new approaches that can deliver sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Jordan is currently home to refugees of 57 nationalities and hosts the second-highest share of refugees per capita globally.¹ The UNHCR currently has 730,658 refugees registered in Jordan, of whom 652,842 (89%) are Syrian.² Four camps provide shelter for 21% of Syrian refugees, while the remaining 79% live among communities, mainly concentrated in the capital, Amman, and the cities of Irbid and Al-Mafraq.²

Despite Syrian displacement in Jordan being primarily urban, the response has not mirrored this reality. Public urban infrastructure, already under strain, has not been able to respond to refugee needs. Several sectors where Jordan was progressing on its development goals — including healthcare — have seen progress slowed or reversed (for example, the return of communicable diseases).³

As part of the Protracted Displacement in an Urban World (PDUW) project (Box 1), IIED and partners led an extensive data collection exercise

in Jordan. The research aimed to deepen understanding of refugee experiences in the camp and the city.

We developed two main analytical frameworks to draw out findings: wellbeing; and displacement economies. We broke down the concept of wellbeing into five components — bodily, economic, political, social and psychosocial — and derived scores for each component for people who participated in a survey. We also developed a displacement economies framework to assess the collective economy that refugees create through their livelihood activities, enterprise, need for services and consumption, and mutual support and diaspora inputs.

We gathered quantitative and qualitative data with Syrian refugees from two sites: the capital city, Amman — specifically the neighbourhood of Sweileh; and Zaatari camp, the largest of the four Syrian refugee camps in Jordan.

With no political resolution to the Syrian conflict in sight, it is time to plan for the future

Amman hosts over a quarter of all Syrian refugees not living in camps in Jordan (27%).² Sweileh falls under the Greater Amman Municipality and is home to an estimated 179,000 people, including a sizeable Syrian refugee community.⁴ Zaatari camp is currently home to 83,923 Syrian refugees. It is relatively isolated; the nearest city (Al-Mafraq) is 10 km away.

The quantitative analysis in this briefing is derived from a random survey of 398 Syrian refugees in Zaatari, 368 Syrian refugees in Sweileh, and 217 Jordanian nationals ('hosts') in Sweileh. We also carried out qualitative interviews, exploring issues of wellbeing, livelihoods and enterprise in greater depth with 100 people across the two sites. The proportion of women and men surveyed and interviewed was roughly equal.

What did we find?

Refugees in the camp have lower levels of bodily wellbeing, which are exacerbated by mobility restrictions

Within our PDUW wellbeing framework, bodily wellbeing covers priority areas of humanitarian care, including food; healthcare; safety; shelter; and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Refugees in Zaatari camp have lower levels of bodily wellbeing despite the majority of humanitarian aid being spent in camps on care priorities that fall under this domain.

Lack of access to healthcare had a significant impact. Only 51% of Zaatari residents were satisfied with their access to healthcare (compared to 73% in the city). Interviewees described huge difficulties when they require surgery and other significant medical support. Transferring their medical cases to hospitals outside the camp is complicated and entails long waiting periods.

Furthermore, interviewees reported that the camp lacks many medical specialists and available care has generally deteriorated. Patients must wait, often in pain, sometimes for extended periods, until they are permitted to leave the camp to receive treatment.

Humanitarian spending on food in the camp has not achieved food security. Despite all camp-based refugees receiving food vouchers, 40% of Zaatari refugees reported not having had enough to eat in the past week.

A similar trend emerges with shelter: despite humanitarian aid providing shelter for camp residents, camp-based refugees said their provided accommodation is unhealthy (prone to rust and insects), unsafe (prone to fires) and undignified ("not a home"). They also feel less safe in their neighborhood compared to city-based refugees (63% vs 92%). This was especially true for women, with close to half (46%) of camp-based refugee women reporting that they feel unsafe.

We recommend conducting a cost-benefit analysis of humanitarian spending in camps to evaluate the effectiveness of aid delivery in these priority areas of care. A decade has passed since Zaatari camp was established and there is no political resolution to the Syrian conflict in sight: it is time to plan for the future.

Refugees want to be in the city, but urban refugees struggle with a lack of support and services

Both urban and camp-based refugees overwhelmingly thought it was easier to lead a good life in the city (92%) compared to the camp (8%), and qualitative interviews with refugees who had moved from the camp to the city indicated that very few had any intention of moving back. Yet, despite preferring life in the city, urban refugees scored lower than camp refugees on four of the five wellbeing components — economic, social, political and psychosocial.

The lack of adequate and accessible support and services for urban refugees has contributed to these lower scores. Urban refugees display greater food insecurity than camp refugees, with close to half (45%) of urban refugees reporting not having had enough to eat in the past week. Urban refugees also struggle to afford their rent, and the shelter available to them is of lower quality and poses health risks (from mould and humidity).

The limited humanitarian provision available in the city is failing to reach refugees who need it.

Box 1. Out of camp or out of sight?

Protracted Displacement in an Urban World (PDUW) was a comparative mixed-methods research project focusing on the wellbeing and livelihoods of displaced people in camps and urban areas in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Jordan. It had three main aims:

- To build an evidence base on the opportunities and challenges of hosting displaced people in camps compared with urban areas
- To assess current responses to protracted displacement in towns and cities and to raise awareness of unmet needs and economic contributions of refugees and internally displaced people.
- To support municipal authorities and other local actors to use participatory planning to co-produce innovative and inclusive solutions to forced displacement in cities.

Refugees that had approached humanitarian agencies for support to deal with food insecurity and shelter challenges described administrative processes that can be humiliating. Some reported never hearing back about the outcome of their application:

They [the humanitarian agency] came to visit me last time, and they said that they are concerned about humidity, and they took photos, and that was it... There are some who ask you what you eat and what you drink. I have been living in this country for ten years. Is it possible that I won't have a fridge? A TV? That I won't have something to cover myself with? They ask questions that are provoking, to be honest. "How many times do you eat potatoes?" I'm really not sure how to convey the idea to you. Do I need to smell [have body odour], pardon me, so you would believe that I am in need? The indicators they use are provoking ... We tried to convey this more than once but [to] no avail.

—Displaced man, aged 38, Sweileh

Urban refugees report feeling isolated and have less access to information about their rights than in camps. Compared to camp-based refugees, they did not have clear referral pathways when in need. When asked who they could call upon to act on their behalf to represent their collective needs, most urban refugees responded "nobody".

With 79% of Syrian refugees living out of camp, there is an urgent need for humanitarian programming that is specifically designed for urban refugees. Humanitarian agencies should coordinate their responses with existing national and municipal development plans. Doing so can support accessibility and inclusivity. This is particularly the case in development sectors where public infrastructure has struggled to expand to address the needs of Syrian refugees (including housing, healthcare and education). Syrian displacement in Jordan is primarily urban and requires coordinated urban solutions.

Restrictions on mobility and work negatively impact livelihoods and wellbeing, and waste potential

For refugees in camps, mobility restrictions limit their ability to work outside the camp and, if they operate a business inside the camp, mobility restrictions and merchandise control restrict their capacity to grow their enterprises. Camp-based refugee enterprises do benefit from an

artificial market with a captive customer base and artificially reduced costs (no registration fees, taxes, utility expenses and so on), however they face significant risk due to uncertainty over the future of the camp and refugee residency status. The humanitarian aid-dependent economy in Zaatari is not sustainable in the long run. Refugee entrepreneurs have no guarantee of a return on their investment as they lack legal documents or recognised rights over the spaces they occupy, and they could lose everything if the camp is closed.

Urban refugees struggle to achieve decent work conditions. Self-employed refugees have benefitted from changes to the work permit system that allow more flexibility to work in different sectors. This has enabled Syrian refugees who work in the informal sector (particularly construction and agriculture) to formalise their activities. However, the cost of the permit continues to be a challenge and, even if they acquire self-employed (flexible) working permits, refugees are not allowed to register micro, small, and medium businesses under their own name. For refugees wanting to operate formally in the city, a common strategy is to partner with Jordanians (that is, registering a Syrian business under a Jordanian national's name). However, these informal arrangements leave many refugees unprotected and exposed to exploitation, and many are reluctant to invest more money because of the increased risks, which hinders expansion and growth.

Self-employment is also less secure and more onerous than being an employee; self-employed workers do not have access to social protection (pensions, medical insurance, unemployment benefits, maternity leave) unless they can pay for it, and are generally more exposed to unjustified dismissal or unilateral ending of contracts.

These factors contribute to urban refugees scoring lower than camp refugees for the 'decent work' component of the Displaced Economies framework, reporting less safe working conditions, lower likelihood of having formal contracts and lower job satisfaction. Research findings demonstrate that, like urban refugees, the host Jordanian community also scores lower on economic wellbeing than camp-based refugees, suggesting that policies aimed at improving decent work conditions in the city could have positive impacts on both host and refugee communities.

Urban refugees' residency permits also prevent them from opening bank accounts, getting driving licences, using their qualifications and skills to work in their area of expertise, registering a business, or trading in and out of the country.

This has wide-reaching consequences, curtailing economic capability, hindering social integration, and impacting mental health:

I don't feel I'm part of the community because I can't provide properly for my family. I'm sitting around all day, and I can't work. Why am I alive? I am not contributing to society.

—Displaced man, aged 33, Sweileh

Travel restrictions currently imposed via residency permits for refugees prevent them from conducting pilgrimage (Hajj) and visiting family from whom they have been separated. A decade after their displacement, many Syrian refugees live with the continued fear of deportation. Their uncertain residency status makes it difficult for them to imagine a future in Jordan, even if their preference is to remain, and makes them hesitant to further invest in or grow their businesses.

Syrian refugees are growing Jordan's economy, despite restrictions

Despite these challenges and restrictions, Syrian entrepreneurs are injecting money and resources into the Jordanian economy with their demand for supplies and services, paying for partnerships, registration, and taxes, as well as creating employment and training opportunities. Businesses in Sweileh have further contributed to refugee self-reliance and integration. Refugees have used their own savings with support from family to start their own businesses without having access to financial services.

Refugees have turned prior work experience and domestic skills into business ventures. Women refugees have discovered their entrepreneurial capacity and have turned their knowledge and domestic skills into productive assets, also changing negative perceptions of working women within Syrian communities.

Even within limited opportunities, Syrians are contributing to Jordan's economic growth. Allowing Syrian refugees to register micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises in their own names will create more opportunities for training, employment and income, and vastly reduce risks and insecurity.

Looking forward: what can be done?

Over a decade has passed since Syrian refugees were displaced to Jordan. Aid continues to maintain camps, but camp life is restricted, uncertain and not sustainable. Urban refugees receive very little aid compared to camp residents, but despite very difficult circumstances and challenging restrictions, they contribute to Jordan's economy. Yet, they struggle with economic insecurity and social and political isolation.

It is time for donors and humanitarian organisations to review the encampment policy and focus on designing and delivering better programming for urban refugees. A forward-looking plan that recognises Syrian displacement as a predominantly urban challenge is critical.

The government of Jordan should facilitate residence status for Syrian refugees to allow them to live in security and, with more certainty, to travel, work, register businesses and realise their potential.

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The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Professor Alison Brown, Cardiff University and Dr Lucy Earle, IIED, and the contributions made by partners at Samuel Hall and the Phenix Centre.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

Cardiff University is a member of the UK's elite Russell Group of top universities, ranked fifth in the UK for research quality.

The Hashemite University is a public university in Jordan, pioneer in teaching, research and innovation, seeks to prepare eligible human capital capable of contributing to scientific and human development and keeping pace with the times and needs of society.

PDUW is a comparative research project on the wellbeing, livelihoods and enterprises of displaced people in urban areas and camps in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Jordan.

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ISBN 978-1-83759-072-8

PDUW was funded by UKRI through the Global Challenges Research Fund programme, the IKEA Foundation, the SDC and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.



Notes

¹ UNHCR (2021) Fact Sheet: Jordan, September 2021. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Jordan%20country%20factsheet%20-%20September%202021.pdf> / ² UNHCR (2023) Registered Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Jordan, update date: 2/11/2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/105076> / ³ Francis, A (2015) Jordan's Refugee Crisis. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_247_Francis_Jordan_final.pdf / ⁴ Department of Statistics (2023) Population Estimates of The Kingdom By Municipality and Sex, for End of Year 2022. Directorate of Households and Population Surveys, DOS, Jordan. <https://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/population/population-2>

