



Syrian children gather outside a school in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, September 2015. Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

# RIGHT TO A FUTURE

Empowering refugees from Syria and host governments to face a long-term crisis

With no end to the conflict in Syria in sight, the four million people forced to flee the country have no foreseeable prospect of safe return. And as the impact of the crisis on neighbouring countries grows and aid dries up, the situation for these refugees is becoming increasingly dire.

This briefing calls for a new approach by the international community, including Syria's neighbours; one which offers hope, safety and dignity to the millions of refugees, and gives them a chance to contribute to the societies and economies of their hosts.



# SUMMARY

For nearly five years now, the world has been witnessing the unfolding of one of the largest displacement crises since World War II. Fleeing a devastating conflict that has already claimed the lives of more than a quarter of a million people, more than four million people have left Syria<sup>1</sup> and found temporary shelter in neighbouring countries. This year, driven by a loss of hope and worsening living conditions across the Middle East, Syrian refugees have taken to risky migration to Europe in larger numbers than ever. Their arrival has signalled more clearly the need to create a radical new approach to managing the mass displacement across the wider Euro-Mediterranean region.

Most refugee crises last for ten years or more,<sup>2</sup> and there is little to suggest that the current crisis in Syria will fall outside this trend. As the situation inside Syria continues to deteriorate, there is no foreseeable prospect for the safe return of refugees. At the same time, the main refugee-hosting countries – Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan – are all facing enormous and diverse economic and social challenges as a consequence of the crisis. These challenges range from localized demographic shifts to pressure on infrastructure, public services and labour markets.

The scale and duration of the crisis mean that emergency humanitarian responses, while as necessary as ever, are no longer enough. Humanitarian aid must now be complemented by more sustainable approaches to help refugees and host communities cope in the medium and longer terms. Over the past year, the governments of Syria's neighbours, in cooperation with international aid agencies and donors, have increasingly recognized this reality. Together, they have developed a so-called 'resilience agenda'<sup>3</sup> to help refugee-hosting countries deal with the huge weight associated with supporting refugees from Syria.

But for the refugees themselves, increased vulnerability, not resilience, is the norm. More and more refugees are being pushed to make desperate choices. Children are forced to leave school and work illegally, girls are forced into marriage before their time, and many have little option but to risk their lives on dangerous boat journeys in the hope of reaching Europe, or even to return to Syria.

This briefing highlights the pressing needs faced by refugees and host communities and describes the possible pathways towards a new approach by Syria's neighbours and the international community. This approach would offer hope, safety and dignity to the millions who have fled Syria, and a chance to contribute to the societies and economies of their host countries by offering them greater social and economic opportunities as refugees.

Such an approach entails host countries addressing the legal and policy barriers that prevent refugees from building a dignified existence in their temporary displacement. It pays special attention to the issues of legal stay in their host countries and their ability to support themselves and their families better and to access services. For its part, the international community must recognize that refugee-hosting states cannot and should not take these necessary steps on their own. This presumes a commitment to providing stable and predictable long-term funding and investment in building the technical capacity of host countries to manage the displacement and its consequences.

The alternative future is one of missed opportunities, not only for millions of refugees from Syria, but also for neighbouring countries to leverage the positive contributions that these refugees can make.

To address the challenges facing refugees and the countries that received them, seven organizations call on international donors and refugee-hosting governments to work together on five different areas:

- **Ensuring the ‘resilience agenda’ benefits the most vulnerable.** The resilience agenda should include and benefit all those affected by displacement – including refugees and vulnerable members of host communities.
- **Enabling refugees from Syria to reside in neighbouring countries legally without discrimination.** Procedures to maintain valid documentation and registration must be clear, accessible, and affordable.
- **Allowing refugees from Syria to access basic services,** including adequate and affordable education, medical care and housing, without compromising the quality of public services for host communities. This means significant new investment in national institutions and infrastructure to boost service delivery.
- **Supporting refugees to be more self-reliant** through greater livelihoods opportunities, without negatively affecting the economies of host communities. Donors and host governments should work together to unlock the potential economic contribution that refugees can make to meet their basic needs, while also benefiting the countries where they temporarily reside.
- **Ensuring countries neighbouring Syria receive adequate support** to change policies and practices to allow refugees and the communities hosting them to cope better; pending a political solution to the conflict in Syria and options for the safe return of refugees or resettlement or other forms of admission to third countries.



Bilal Muhammad Sukhi from Ghouta in Syria and Basel Yousef Abo Alsil from Deraa sort waste in an Oxfam recycling centre in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan (September 2015). Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines ‘resilience’ as a ‘transformative process of strengthening the capacity of people, communities and countries to anticipate, manage, transform and recover from shocks’.<sup>4</sup> As the communities hosting refugees from Syria have come under increasing strain, building their resilience and those of national governments has been rightly recognized as an international priority. The UN, aid agencies and governments have documented extensively the enormous impact of hosting millions of refugees on the national economies, public services and infrastructure of countries neighbouring Syria.<sup>5</sup>

However, for many displaced Syrians, their ability to cope – their ‘resilience’ – is actually being undermined, forcing them to make impossible choices about their futures. In August 2015 close to 4,000 refugees returned to war-torn Syria from Jordan; about twice as many as the previous month.<sup>6</sup> This figure steadied in September, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>7</sup> In Lebanon, UNHCR estimates that in recent months 6,000–7,000 refugees from Syria have been departing from Tripoli’s port to Turkey on a weekly basis, some of whom have been displaced in Lebanon for some time, while many others are simply in transit from Syria.<sup>8</sup>

The barriers to refugees’ resilience are multifaceted and vary across the region, but they all share two key interlinked elements:

- National legislation and policies in some of the countries neighbouring Syria makes it increasingly difficult for Syrians to live in those countries legally and significantly impedes refugees’ access to assistance and public services.
- It is often impossible to meet basic needs because most refugees have by now depleted their savings and sold their original assets, and there are very few legal ways to earn an income.

## LEGAL STAY: A FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCK OF RESILIENCE

More than ever, refugees from Syria face immense hurdles when they seek to live legally in countries neighbouring Syria. New regulations applied by some of the host countries have made it increasingly difficult for refugees to renew their residency. As a result, across the region, refugees have been experiencing limited freedom of movement and shrinking access to assistance and livelihoods.<sup>9</sup>

- In **Lebanon**, driven by concerns of economic and political destabilization as a result of a refugee caseload equal to a third of its population, the government has adopted an official public policy to reduce the number of Syrian refugees on its territory.<sup>10</sup> As of 5 January 2015, Lebanese borders have been effectively closed for most, if not all, civilians fleeing the war in Syria who wish to stay in Lebanon. Those who are transiting to third countries can still do so with appropriate documentation. In May 2015, UNHCR was asked by the government to cease registration of any new refugees and to de-register those who entered the country this year. Those already in Lebanon have become subject to new complex, costly, and arbitrarily applied regulations to renew residency visas. As a result, an estimated 70 percent of Syrian refugees<sup>11</sup> in Lebanon do not have valid legal stay in

the country. This has far-reaching implications for their ability to cope. Without the valid legal documents, refugees live in fear of arrest, detention and deportation if they are stopped at checkpoints across the country. They therefore minimize their movement, limiting access to the basic services and aid they need, or to paid work to support themselves.<sup>12</sup> In a recent large-scale survey, 71 percent of refugees said checkpoints are important in terms of accessing work or services, and 37 percent of refugees reported experiencing problems at checkpoints.<sup>13</sup>

- In **Jordan**, strict procedures exist that are intended to regulate who is allowed to leave formal refugee camps such as Za'atari and Azraq to live in other parts of the country.<sup>14</sup> Estimates suggest that at least 45 percent of refugees from Syria currently living outside the camps are unable to meet the stringent requirements of this 'bailout' system.<sup>15</sup> Refugees who left the camp outside the bailout system after July 2014 are unable to update their UN registration or Ministry of Interior (Mol) registration to be recognized as refugees. Without updated Mol registration, refugees from Syria face problems receiving aid outside of the camps, registering their children in schools, accessing public health services at subsidized rates, and registering births, deaths and marriages.<sup>16</sup> These refugees from Syria – including children – are also at risk of involuntary relocation to the camps or even forcible return to Syria.<sup>17</sup> Since April 2014, more than 11,000 refugees have been relocated to Za'atari and Azraq camps by police, largely because of their inability to prove that they had complied with bailout procedures or because they were caught working without a work permit.<sup>18</sup> In 2015, the bailout system was all but suspended, leaving camp-based refugees with almost no opportunities to officially move to other areas in Jordan.<sup>19</sup>
- In **Turkey**,<sup>20</sup> refugees from Syria are registered by the national authorities rather than by UNHCR, as is the case in European countries and elsewhere. Those who are registered are granted temporary protection if they present themselves to the authorities within a 'reasonable' timeframe after entering the country. This allows them, in principle, access to public services (health, education and social assistance) in the province where the person is formally registered. At least 600,000 refugees from Syria are estimated to remain unregistered<sup>21</sup> and therefore cannot officially use public services, including schools and temporary education centres in Turkey.
- The **Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)** hosts almost all the refugees from Syria who have crossed the Iraqi border. The Kurdish regional government (KRG) issues residency permits to registered refugees that allow them to rent houses, obtain work permits and access healthcare, education and other services.<sup>22</sup> However, many (notably those living outside camps) are facing various obstacles to obtaining residency permits.<sup>23</sup> This inequity is reflected by differences in the ability to obtain residency permits between governorates; in Dohuk, 80 percent of all refugees have a residency permit as do 84 percent in Dohuk-administered Ninewa, while those registered drops to 31 percent in Erbil and 18 percent in Sulaymaniyah.<sup>24</sup>
- In **Egypt**,<sup>25</sup> refugees who are registered with UNHCR receive an asylum-seekers card. This enables them to stay in Egypt until they undertake a Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interview, but they face significant challenges in accessing public services. Many Syrian refugees choose not to, or are unable to, register with UNHCR. While there are currently almost 130,000 refugees from Syria registered, the Government of Egypt estimates that the true number of refugees in the country is more than double this.<sup>26</sup> Without registration, refugees face a range of protection challenges, according to UNHCR.<sup>27</sup>

Valid legal stay is a key precondition for many refugees to be able to access services and humanitarian aid, but it is one which comes with the array of challenges described above. As long as the host countries impose restrictions on refugees' ability to legally remain on their territory, any attempts to strengthen the resilience of refugees will be ineffective.

## LETTING REFUGEES HELP THEMSELVES: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Nearly five years into the crisis, the majority of refugees from Syria have sold their assets, depleted their savings, and accumulated large debts.<sup>28</sup> Refugee-hosting countries, as in most other parts of the world, impose different policies and legislation aimed at protecting their national labour markets. This puts legal limits on refugees' income generation opportunities, leaving them reliant on unsustainable levels of aid and certain to accumulate further debt.

### Box 1: High Commissioner António Guterres at the opening of UNHCR ExCom (2015)

'[A]fter so many years in exile, [refugees'] resources have run out and living conditions have been steadily deteriorating. Seven out of ten Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in extreme poverty, and in Jordan, the proportion of refugees in urban areas living below the Jordanian poverty line is 86 per cent. Refugees across the region are unable to work legally, and over half of their children are not getting any education.'

See <http://www.unhcr.org/561227536.html>, last accessed 31 October 2015

As the crisis continues, humanitarian assistance alone is no longer able to address the challenges. Policies and laws that limit refugees' legal ability to secure a livelihood are having adverse effects on both refugees and host communities. Poorly designed or non-existent legal provisions for refugees to access livelihoods opportunities are creating a race to the bottom as competition between refugees and national workers at the lower end of the labour market pushes both groups further into poverty. It is also causing community tensions to rise.

- **In Lebanon**, refugees from Syria are required to sign a pledge not to work in order to renew a residency visa on the basis of their UNHCR registration document. The alternative is to forego UNHCR registration and seek a Lebanese citizen to sign a pledge of responsibility for the refugee – a system which may allow the Syrian citizen to access labour market, but at the same time creates dependency between individual Lebanese and refugees. Due to their precarious legal position in the country, the vast majority of Syrians work with no legal rights – an estimated 92 percent of refugees from Syria who work lack a contract.<sup>29</sup> This often leads to exploitation, as well as to further undercutting of wages, which exacerbates tensions with the host community.<sup>30</sup>



- **In Jordan**, refugees (like all foreigners) require a government-issued permit to work, a means of protecting the local labour market. Even in sectors unrestricted to foreigners, these permits are practically out of reach to refugees, given their cost (often borne by the worker) and administrative requirements. As a result, 99 percent of refugees from Syria who are employed in Jordan work mostly in informal sectors such as agriculture, construction, food service and retail, where they are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.<sup>31</sup> While some 60 percent of Syrian refugee households living in host communities reported receiving some income from informal work, more than two-thirds reported combined earnings of under JOD 200 (US\$282) supporting an average household of 10 per month.<sup>32</sup>
- **Turkey** also requires refugees from Syria to have a permit to work, which they can apply for after they have received Turkish residency.<sup>33</sup> While a small number of Syrians in Turkey have managed to obtain work permits, the vast majority have no right to work under the temporary protection regime and end up working in the informal economy, often in exploitative conditions. More than 86 percent of Syrian refugees surveyed in southern Turkey reported unemployment or the lack of self-employment opportunities as their main concern.<sup>34</sup>
- While the KRG does not issue work permits to refugees from Syria, refugees in the **Kurdish Region of Iraq** can work legally if they have residency permits. As noted above, there are varying degrees of restrictions on obtaining the permits, which excludes many from the labour market. At the same time, the dual crises in Syria and Iraq have had a profound effect on the economy and welfare of the KRI. The large influx of displaced persons from other regions of Iraq, for example, has increased competition for low-wage and agricultural jobs, making it increasingly difficult for refugees from Syria to make a living.<sup>35</sup>
- All foreigners in **Egypt**, including refugees, require a permit to work. The requirements are stringent and include an assessment of legal status, employer sponsorship, and non-competition with nationals. Employer quotas limit the number of non-Egyptians in employment and employers must sponsor an application for work, which is a lengthy and costly process. As a result, only a tiny fraction of refugees from Syria have been able to obtain work permits and even the most skilled refugees face barriers in accessing the formal labour market. Refugees who are employed report concerns related to low wages, poor working conditions, long working hours, and sexual exploitation.<sup>36</sup>

*'We as Syrians are scared to work because if you're caught they will send you back to Syria. First time, they force you to sign a document promising you won't do it again and the second time you're out.'*

Refugee from Syria in Jordan, who was completely reliant on UNHCR cash assistance

The restrictions on earning a legal income are forcing refugees from Syria to adopt a range of negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour, with children increasingly becoming key actors in the survival of their families,<sup>37</sup> or early marriage, as a means of reducing the financial pressures on the household.<sup>38</sup>

Yet with the right support from the donor community, comprehensive and well-tailored national policies in countries neighbouring Syria could be developed that allow refugees to fulfil their human potential without the risk of harassment by the authorities, while also boosting the resilience of host communities.

## Box 2: Access to basic services: The foundation of resilience to prevent a lost generation

Access to health, education and other public services is a prerequisite for individual and collective resilience. However, in host countries basic services are overstretched to breaking point, with needs consistently outstripping available resources and infrastructure at the local and national levels. Increasingly limited access to quality services, such as education, is also exacerbating tensions between refugees and host communities.

Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey are hosting more than 1.4 million school-age refugee children. However, refugee children still encounter many barriers and find limited opportunities to access the overcrowded formal school system, alternative education or other support programmes. Administrative hurdles, such as lack of valid government documentation, and the increased destitution of families rendering them unable to pay for school fees or transport, are also major barriers to accessing education opportunities. Refugee youth have even fewer opportunities to continue their education and receive vocational training or other forms of learning.

As a result, only 48 percent of refugee children from Syria, or 667,000 school-age children, are accessing education opportunities, while close to 52 percent, or 708,000 school-age children, were out of school in the 2014–15 school year. This greatly endangers their present and future resilience, and limits their ability to develop and positively contribute to society. An educated, productive, and engaged young population represents the only chance Syria has to rebuild its society.<sup>39</sup>



Children in Qushtapa camp, Kurdish Region, Iraq. Photo: Klaus Bo Christensen/DRC



## 2 RESILIENCE OF HOSTS AND REFUGEES: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Governments across the region have a responsibility to ensure economic growth, social stability and security for their citizens. In the past five years, governments have faced these tasks under the extraordinary pressure of regional conflict and massive displacement.

The war in Syria and the large influx of refugees have strained infrastructure, public services, and the economies of all Syria's neighbours – countries that were already facing numerous social, economic and political challenges. Most studies indicate that the conflict has had a predominantly negative impact on the economies of Syria's neighbours, with the sporadic development gains unable to offset the disruption to production, trade, tourism, investment and consumer confidence.<sup>40</sup> With regard to refugee arrivals in Jordan<sup>41</sup> and Lebanon<sup>42</sup> for example, there is some evidence that refugees have increased competition for employment in some sectors and affected employment rates and wages.

However, restrictive policies against refugees are also preventing refugee-hosting countries from capitalizing on the opportunities for economic growth that have paradoxically been generated by the crisis – growth that could help build the resilience of both refugees and vulnerable local people. This would be in line with ample evidence from other parts of the world showing how refugees can make a positive contribution to their host state economy when given the opportunity to do so.

### **Box 3: Contributions of refugees to host economies globally**

Refugees are often described as a 'burden' for the countries hosting them. They are perceived as a drain on state budgets, a weight on the economy and an unfair competitor for national workers, bringing down wages.<sup>43</sup> While a large influx of refugees is likely to have a significant socio-economic impact in the short term, research looking at the long-term effects of refugees around the world suggests that this view is often wrong.<sup>44</sup>

An extensive literature review covering OECD countries and the EU found that while there are short-term costs associated with refugee arrivals, they 'make substantial contributions to their new country – expanding consumer markets for local goods, opening new markets, bringing in new skills, creating employment and filling empty employment niches.'<sup>45</sup> An in-depth study in Uganda found 'significant volume of exchange between refugees and Ugandan nationals, as well as ...refugees' creation of employment opportunities for Ugandan nationals'.<sup>46</sup>

In other contexts, as refugees come in, they typically fill jobs that require few language skills. This encourages host communities to specialize in jobs that they are uniquely suited for, like managing these new workers, or talking to customers and suppliers. This makes companies more productive and allows businesses to expand.<sup>47</sup> Refugees can also create new jobs, as refugees appear more likely to open small businesses than other groups. A study in Denmark over 12 years found that Danish people who lived in communities hosting refugees saw their wages grow more quickly than those without refugees.<sup>48</sup>

There are also several examples of states successfully employing large numbers of refugees in the service of economic development, benefiting both displaced and host communities. . In Central America, an intergovernmental initiative to support refugees, backed by significant donor funding meant that, to give one example, Guatemalan “refugees were able to contribute to the agricultural development of the Yucatan Peninsula, [Mexico] in ways that are now well documented”.<sup>49</sup>

Many people living in the countries neighbouring Syria are indeed already gaining from the refugee influx. Landlords, local traders, business owners have benefited from the availability of additional labour and increased consumption and demand.<sup>50</sup>

Refugees from Syria are also providing new skills, expertise and entrepreneurship. International aid and remittances have injected money into the local economies and created jobs. It is not clear, however, whether any of these gains are being felt by those most vulnerable in host communities.<sup>51</sup>

## GIVING REFUGEES A CHANCE TO CONTRIBUTE TO HOST SOCIETIES AND SUSTAIN THEMSELVES

The restrictions on the labour market currently being imposed, although comparable to the policies and practices of governments the world over, are arguably not building on opportunities to employ the skills, diversity, expertise and entrepreneurship often brought by refugee populations. These resources could, on the other hand, stimulate economic growth, create more jobs, and be leveraged to mitigate the impact of the Syrian crisis on the host countries. For example, greater formalization of the economy would enable refugee-hosting governments to ensure local wages are not being undercut, provide an opportunity to increase revenue collections through income taxes, and fill specific skills gaps in the labour force. Though comprehensive research in the current Middle East context is lacking, there is ample anecdotal evidence that refugees are already contributing to the economics of countries neighbouring Syria.

- **Lebanon** has seen a notable rise in unemployment rates since 2011, with additional 220,000–320,000 mainly unskilled youth being unemployed by the end of 2014 – a development ascribed to the impact of the Syrian crisis.<sup>52</sup> But Lebanon has a long history of employing Syrian seasonal workers in sectors such as agriculture or construction, for which there has traditionally been very limited interest among Lebanese nationals. Before the war in Syria began, such seasonal migratory flows were fuelling the Lebanese economy, and a number of Syrian refugees are former seasonal workers who have become refugees *in situ* and whose services are still needed for part of the year. According to a recent World Bank report, refugees from Syria have also played a crucial role in finding new trading routes with Syria after the old ones suffered as a result of war – for example, by facilitating cross-border trade or investing their own savings or remittances of relatives abroad and from international aid.<sup>53</sup> The World Bank also points to the resilience of Lebanon’s renowned service export industry.<sup>54</sup> Its quantitative analysis suggests that at least part of this resilience is related to the increased demand for the country’s services spurred by Syrian refugees.<sup>55</sup> This is not entirely surprising, considering that this population group directs most of the assistance it receives straight into the Lebanese market – including US\$200 average monthly rents, amounting to an estimated US\$36m per month, as well as regular purchases of food and non-food items.<sup>56</sup>

- The **Jordanian** economy has also seen some benefits. In 2013 more than a billion dollars was invested directly into the national economy by Syrians.<sup>57</sup> Despite instability in neighbouring countries and the loss of regional trade, Jordan still experienced GDP growth of 3.5 percent in 2014.<sup>58</sup> Although it is estimated that between 160,000 and 200,000 refugees from Syria have been working in Jordan without permits,<sup>59</sup> mostly in the informal sector and often for extremely low wages, there is little evidence to show that they have displaced a significant number of Jordanians.<sup>60</sup> The overall official unemployment rate in Jordan has remained steady at 12.9 percent in the first quarter of 2015 compared with 12.2 percent in 2012.<sup>61</sup> This is most likely because refugees from Syria are primarily working in the informal agriculture, construction and retail sectors; areas that are largely unattractive to national workers and which have previously been filled by migrant workers.<sup>62</sup> However, given that Syrian refugees are typically working outside of any legal framework, there are concerns about how their presence may create a potential downward spiral in terms of wages and the informalization of the labour market.<sup>63</sup>

#### **Box 4: Karima's story: From destitution to a life with dignity**

Karima, 29, a mother of four, fled with her children to Lebanon after a sniper killed her husband in Syria. Karima and her children were almost destitute:

'A neighbour told me that an NGO is training women in hairdressing, sewing and cooking skills to help them open small businesses from home. During the training sessions, I met many Lebanese and Syrian women like me and stopped feeling lonely. I made friends, and we shared our problems and gave each other moral support. I had never held a blow dryer before, but during the training I realized that I was actually talented. I started styling my neighbours' hair and word spread that I was good.

I am now an assistant hairdresser in one of the salons in the area. The owner wants me to train with her for another month before she starts paying me a fixed salary. I was hopeless, in debt, and desperate. Now things are definitely changing for the better. In a month, I'll be providing my children with all their needs without relying on anybody.'

- In **Turkey**, while there is evidence that Syrians have indeed displaced Turkish workers in the informal sector,<sup>64</sup> significant economic benefits of hosting refugees have also been documented, particularly as Turkey has been a welcoming market for Syrian investors. According to figures from the first half of 2015, of 2,395 foreign capital companies registered, 750 belong to Syrians,<sup>65</sup> an increase on the previous year. Positive economic effects are concentrated in provinces bordering Syria. For example, in Gaziantep there have been considerable investments by Syrians who have built new companies and hired Syrian as well as Turkish workers.<sup>66</sup> Similar evidence exists in other province such as Kilis and Mersin where Syrian companies are providing jobs to local people and helping to expand exports.<sup>67</sup> The export volume to Syria of the southern province of Mersin, for example, has increased threefold from \$16.1m in 2011 to \$64.5m in 2014.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the potential for Syrian labour to benefit Turkish businesses has been acknowledged. For example, the Union of Aegean Mining Exporter declared that they are having difficulties finding workers in the mining sector and would be willing to hire refugees from Syria if they had work permits.<sup>69</sup>

The countries that have been most affected by the war in Syria have reason to be concerned about their economic stability and their ability to provide economic development for the citizens of their countries. However, available evidence suggests that appropriate government policies and international support could allow refugees

from Syria to contribute to the formal economy. This would better enable them to meet their own basic needs, while also providing new skills, experience and investment in host countries or to fill existing gaps in the labour market.

### 3 MOBILIZING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The international community shares responsibility for supporting refugees from Syria and addressing the challenges posed by hosting such large numbers of people. Covering the basic needs of refugees, expanding public services and allowing refugees increased entry into the formal labour market are courageous policy choices that can build resilience for refugees and host communities. But they require immense and immediate investment from the world's wealthy countries in order to bring longer term positive outcomes.

#### A NEW PACT ON AID

There is increased recognition that the crisis is a protracted one and that longer-term planning is now needed. At the same time, the humanitarian assistance on which so many refugees survive is being drastically cut. This has immediate implications for refugees' resilience.

The **humanitarian response** to the Syria crisis is critically underfunded. As of 1 November 2015 and nearing the end of the year, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) was 49 percent funded, the Syria Strategic Response Plan (SRP) 43 percent funded and the Iraq Response Plan (IRP) 53 percent funded.<sup>70</sup> Cuts in immediate assistance are having a devastating impact on the ability of refugees to cope. Following World Food Programme (WFP) cuts in food assistance, most refugee families surveyed in Lebanon said they had to change how they consume food, with 69 percent stating they had reduced the number of meals eaten each day and 58 percent saying they had limited their portion sizes.<sup>71</sup> Eighty-nine percent reported a lack of food or money to buy food.<sup>72</sup>

Lack of funding, although critical, is only part of the problem. The 3RP was developed in 2014 to complement the humanitarian response and also address the need to provide **longer term support** to countries hosting large refugee populations. The 3RP incorporates national resilience and humanitarian plans, developed with host governments. However, fears by governments that refugees will end up staying and integrating into local communities – which would have accompanying demographic, economic and political implications – mean that the national response plans and therefore also the 3RP effectively exclude refugees from resilience and development programming. This is exacerbating the issues described above, while missing the opportunity to strengthen the self-reliance and coping strategies of refugees as they wait for the right conditions to return or to be resettled in other countries.

Traditional ways of providing development funding have not been tailored to such a large-scale, protracted crisis in a middle-income country. Until recently, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt did not qualify for World Bank funding mechanisms

that are available to lower income countries. In October 2015, the World Bank did announce new funding mechanisms that will allow Jordan and Lebanon to access additional funding through soft loans.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, these two countries are already heavily indebted and face political pressure not to accumulate further debt in order to pay for the needs of refugees.

In order for the resilience agenda to become reality, significant long-term and predictable funding will have to become available to the host countries. This needs to be accompanied by programmes specifically designed to help refugees achieve greater self-reliance, as well as increased support to governments to expand public services and review legal restrictions on refugees. Without such a comprehensive package, the resilience agenda risks remaining just an exercise in well-meaning rhetoric.

## DONOR COUNTRIES MUST PRACTICE WHAT THEY PREACH

For some of the most vulnerable refugees, the only safe and durable option is to receive protection outside of countries neighbouring Syria. UNHCR estimates that approximately 10 percent of the refugee population in neighbouring countries are eligible for resettlement. But governments have pledged to accept less than 3 percent, and only 17,000 refugees have actually been resettled.<sup>74</sup> With notable exceptions such as Germany and Norway, third countries have offered resettlement or humanitarian admissions to a woefully small number of refugees.

Beyond resettlement, few alternative safe and legal routes exist for refugees to seek protection in Europe, such as offering visas for employment, sponsorship programmes, educational scholarships, and family reunification programmes.

Lacking viable legal routes to third countries, many people, including refugees from Syria are often turning to smugglers, at great cost and danger to their lives. More than 744,175 arrivals to Europe by sea alone have been recorded in 2015, 53 percent of them Syrian nationals.<sup>75</sup> The journey to Europe is in many cases full of abuse, exploitation, and human rights violations, including sexual abuse against women and children.<sup>76</sup> People will continue to make these dangerous journeys of last resort for as long as the status quo where they are seems hopeless and they have no safe options to get to third countries.

The European Union and its member states, other wealthy countries and emerging economies must accept their share of the responsibility. They need to provide more stable and predictable long-term funding and investment, to provide options for durable solutions outside of the Middle East, and to support refugee-hosting countries to review policies and laws that can undermine the resilience of refugees and host communities.

*'Rich countries must not become gated communities, their people averting their eyes from the bloodstains in the driveway ... crises cry out urgently for rational and coordinated action. Unilateral attempts to close borders are almost certainly futile, and the response cannot just lie in aggressive, and often counterproductive, anti-smuggling plans.'*

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein



## 4 CONCLUSION

Warnings have long been ignored about the consequences of failing to comprehensively address the needs of refugees and their host communities and governments, as well as the crisis in Syria itself. The result is a loss of hope and a deepening spiral of poverty and desperation for refugees and host communities. One result is that hundreds of thousands of refugees are now willing to take dangerous journeys to Europe; to reach countries where they hope to achieve permanent protection, the means to earn enough money to afford the basics to survive, study, and access social services. These are basic human needs that can and should be granted to all refugees, including refugees from Syria, irrespective of where they have fled from and where they are seeking safety.

Ultimately, ending the violence against civilians and reaching a political solution in Syria that would allow for the safe return of refugees and the possibility of rebuilding the nation is the only way to solve this crisis. Meanwhile, collective effort and courageous decision making from the international community, including neighbouring countries hosting refugees, is required to stop the situation from worsening.

The international community, including the refugee-hosting countries in the region, must move away from a potentially lose–lose approach towards implementing more practical, pragmatic, and generous policies that can better address the humanitarian crisis and improve the overall situation for refugees and host communities alike.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**To ensure that the resilience agenda benefits the most vulnerable, international donors and refugee-hosting governments should:**

- Include strong provisions to help refugees as well as host communities in resilience components of national response plans;
- Incorporate a significant humanitarian component, in addition to development thinking, within resilience strategies in order to continue to meet acute needs;
- Provide livelihoods opportunities that benefit both host communities and refugees as part of comprehensive development packages to boost national economies.

**To enable refugees from Syria to reside in neighbouring countries legally, without discrimination, donors should work with host governments to:**

- Ensure that refugees are able to regularize and/or renew their legal residency, register with UNHCR and the authorities, and access basic services, irrespective of where they live;
- Find reasonable solutions for those who do not have original Syrian identity documents, and separate out civil documentation procedures from registration status;
- Adjust required deadlines for administrative procedures (those needed to ensure legal stay) so that they are realistic and affordable, taking account of refugees' ability to access the procedures and the host governments' capacity to administer them;

- Review policies that limit refugees' freedom of movement, including procedures that prevent Syrian refugees from leaving refugee camps. These procedures should have a clear and transparent appeal process that is monitored by an independent actor.

**To ensure refugees from Syria are able to access adequate and affordable basic services, including adequate and affordable education, medical care and housing, without comprising the quality of public services for host communities:**

- *International donors* need to ensure basic public services are sufficiently supported so that they are affordable and of sufficient quality for refugees and host communities alike;
- *Refugee-hosting governments* should simplify administrative requirements that impede Syrian refugees' access to public services such as education and healthcare;
- *Refugee-hosting governments* should enable all refugees from Syria to access humanitarian assistance and protection services provided by aid agencies regardless of their legal status or documentation.

**To support refugees from Syria to be more self-reliant through greater livelihoods opportunities, and contribute to national and local economies, donors and host governments should:**

- Capitalize on the skills and expertise present in the Syrian refugee community and identify ways that refugees can legally earn an income and thrive in host countries while also stimulating long-term economic growth for host economies;
- Provide legal and financial incentives for more joint business ventures between Syrians and host communities, including Syrian investment, to boost local economies, facilitate more cooperation between communities, and generate income for refugee and host communities alike;
- Promote private sector engagement by exploring well-monitored public–private partnerships, encouraging increased investments and inclusive business development in areas most affected by the crisis in ways that can benefit the most vulnerable;
- Continue to support the provision of life-saving assistance such as unconditional cash support for the most vulnerable refugee families, while refugees' ability to access legal and reliable means of income in host countries is limited;
- Facilitate and support livelihoods interventions that address host government economic development priorities and refugees' needs to earn some income, particularly in sectors where there is a high demand in the market.

**To support countries neighbouring Syria to change policies and practices to better allow refugees and the communities hosting them to cope, donors and governments should:**

- Increase development and humanitarian funding commitments to the response and immediately follow through on funds pledged at the Kuwait donor conference in 2015 for Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, and Iraq;
- Expand funding through innovative, flexible, transparent and collaborative financing modalities to allow for a strategic, multi-year and sustained response that breaks humanitarian and development silos;

- Prioritize development investments that improve public infrastructure, and increase the overall housing stock, health and education services and the income-earning opportunities that can best benefit both host communities and refugee populations;
- Offer resettlement to the most vulnerable refugees by end of 2016, equivalent to 10 percent of the refugee population, as well as subsidiary protection or other forms of humanitarian admission such as family-based immigration processes or academic scholarship opportunities, in line with the Refugee Convention;
- Ensure respect for the rights of those seeking asylum by all countries, including guaranteeing that they will not face refoulement and that due process is afforded where there is risk of deportation.

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