

## BRIEFING PAPER

# UNDER PRESSURE an overview of the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on host communities in Lebanon

World Vision UK briefing for Members of Parliament

**Above** A barefoot Syrian refugee girl plays in the dirt outside her tent. © 2013 Patricia Mouamar/World Vision

### **Children are always the worst affected by any crisis; as jobs, access to essential services and resources become scarce, it is they who will suffer the most in the long term.**

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in March 2011, half of the 3m Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon to escape the conflict in their homeland. Approximately 191,000 people have been killed in Syria since the beginning of the conflict, including 11,000 children. 6.5m people are internally displaced. Children and vulnerable groups have been disproportionately impacted by the violence and displacement, with few Syrian children attending school in the last few years. Few people predict an end to the conflict any time soon, more anticipate continued or increased destruction.

Lebanon and its people host the largest refugee population per capita in the world, at over 30%. In a country of just over four million people, 1.2 million Lebanese citizens are directly affected by the influx of refugees. In July 2013, World Vision launched its report *Under Pressure: The impact of the Syria crisis on Lebanese host communities* detailing the enormous impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on Lebanon and its people. Since then we have seen the pressure on Lebanese communities grow and their basic services overwhelmed as they have welcomed refugees with nowhere else to go.

The Syrian refugees are not the only ones to have found refuge in Lebanon. In addition to 4.4 million Lebanese citizens and the estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees, the country also hosts 450,000 Palestinian refugees and some 60,000 Iraqi refugees. These figures represent the largest per capita refugee population in the world, by far of over 30%.

### **Everyday needs under everyday threat**

**Declining hope and growing fear:** The security situation continues to be a challenge in Lebanon, especially given the current developments in the region (Iraq and Syria). The Lebanese people continue to be worried about further escalation of the conflict. Syrians who have fled violence in their hometowns are increasingly frightened that war will follow them, as fighting has begun to spill across the border into towns such as Aarsal throughout 2014. These developments continue to perpetuate fears of an uncertain future for both Lebanese and Syrian children. Fear of growing poverty in Lebanon is turning towards fear of survival and escalation of conflict.

**No space to live:** Displaced populations have largely found shelter within – generally poor– host communities, including Palestinian camps. With more refugees crossing the border every day, options for shelter are decreasing. According to the UN, Syrian refugees living in sub-standard shelters increased from 29% to 40% (Aug 13-Mar14). There has also been a decrease in proportion of refugees living in rented apartments from 68% to 57%. Prior to the Syria crisis, Lebanon already had a very high population density with an average of 370 people per square kilometre. Population density now stands at a staggering 520 people per square kilometer. In the UK it is 255.

**Disease and illiteracy on the rise:** Across all key essential services, including health and education, the surge in demand is increasingly met with a decline in access to and quality of these services. According to a World Bank report (April 2014), it is estimated that additional spending of USD 2.5 billion would be required to reinstate the access to and quality of public services to their pre-Syrian conflict level. Health services in particular are under increasing strain in Lebanon. Prior to the refugee crisis, the public education sector in Lebanon was already facing challenges. Now four years into the Syria crisis, the quality of the education that children receive, both Lebanese and Syrian, is noted to have declined due to large numbers in the classrooms.

**Nowhere to work:** Access to jobs is one of the biggest challenges host communities are facing. Statistics show that the unemployment rate in Lebanon is anticipated to increase to 20% in 2014 (11% in 2013). The economic repercussions and the unstable security situation have particularly impacted food production and the agriculture economy, which historically employed many unskilled Lebanese workers. These worrying trends have been compounded by a drought during winter 2013-2014.

## Recommendations for the UK government

The plight of Syrian refugees cannot and should not be forgotten, but we must never neglect or underestimate the pressure the host communities are under. We strongly encourage the international community to continue and increase its assistance to those communities in Lebanon who have opened their communities and sometimes even their homes to those fleeing death and destruction in Syria.

World Vision proposes the following three steps for the UK to support Lebanon as the country continues to support Syrian refugees.

- **Funding to meet immediate needs and avoid conflict:** The UK should ensure that the plight of both Syrian refugees and host communities in Lebanon are not forgotten, and encourage other donors to follow its generous example of funding the existing response plans. Funding towards health, education and shelter should be prioritised to organisations able to demonstrate a strong understanding of the needs of local communities. Funding can be used to foster good relationships between local communities and refugees during times of tension.
- **Increased efforts towards regional peace:** The UK should continue its international engagement and support in finding a long-term political solution to the Syrian crisis. It should also prioritize funding for local peace and reconciliation projects in Lebanon. It should support the Government of Lebanon to keep its borders open to all refugees and allow humanitarian agencies to work unhindered in the country.
- **Long-term investment:** The UK should place particular emphasis on long-term investment in sustainable job and livelihoods, education, health, water and sanitation services to build the resilience of host communities and refugees. The regional crisis is likely to last, and preserving Lebanon's stability should be a key priority. Support should include long-term support for infrastructure, training for workers and support for local businesses under pressure.

## What parliamentarians, local officials, party members and other stakeholders can do

- Work with World Vision to ensure that the Syrian regional crisis is on the policy agenda in the run up to the General Election in 2015;
- Register interest with World Vision to table Parliamentary questions, bring a debate to the House, or arrange meetings with relative Ministers;
- Register interest with World Vision to get updates and information on our work and the latest developments in Syria and the wider region.

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