YJIA Podcast
The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon
An Interview with U.N. Professionals Annabella Skof and Bastien Revel
By Virginia Leape

Lebanon has been a primary destination for people fleeing the Syrian War and it has become home to almost 1.5 million Syrian refugees, which now constitute almost a quarter of the population of country. YJIA spoke with Annabella Skof and Bastien Revel, who work for the United Nations on this issue, in a discussion about the policy dilemmas and policy solutions for this crisis. They discuss the ways in which Lebanon’s crisis response can be described as the nexus between humanitarian and development work. In the interview, they explore obstacles to access to work, livelihoods and income for Syrians in Lebanon. YJIA’s Virginia Leape, a member of the podcast team, spoke with Skof and Revel.

YJIA: Could you tell us a bit about the crisis response so far in Lebanon?

Annabella Skof: When the crisis started in 2011, the response was predominantly humanitarian. Trying to feed or keep [refugees] warm, providing shelter, water, sanitation... There were livelihood services, but these were predominantly startup training, business support training, business development training, and vocational training requested by the refugees. And all the aid was predominantly targeted at the refugee population.

It was about 2014 when the number of refugees peaked in the country. Up until then, Lebanon kept an open-door policy. It has a bilateral agreement that facilitated cross-border (movement) of people quite freely. By the end of 2014, there were approximately 1.2 million Syrian refugees working with UNHCR and additional Syrians in the country, but we are not sure how many. Nowadays, we have approximately one million refugees registered with UNHCR, but we estimate that there...
are another 400,000 to 500,000 refugees. So that means 1.5 million Syrians are in Lebanon.

It was also in 2014 that the aid community started to realize that Lebanese were hit very hard by the refugee crisis, in particular the poorer people living in rural areas. This is when the response started to shift. The government, in essence, shut the borders and blocked [the] legal labor market. On the other hand, with the NGO community, the UN managed to negotiate with the government of Lebanon to design a yearly Lebanon crisis response plan, the LCRP, which started in 2014.

And as part of these negotiations on LCRP, there was quite a significant shift in how the livelihood response was handled or was formulated with a much stronger focus on supporting the Lebanese economy to create more jobs. It also included more value chain development; activities to really set an emphasis on stabilization.

The second biggest shift came in the end of 2015, early 2016, in the run-up to what is called the London Conference, a pledging conference held in London in February 2016. It was, for the first time, recognized that it will be very important to focus on creating…opportunities and jobs for both hosting communities and refugees in affected countries of the Syria crisis. And this, for the first time also, brought money to Lebanon to do activities that had been suggested in the LCRP in 2014.

**YJIA:** Thank you. The situation has been described as being at the nexus of a humanitarian and a development crisis. What are your thoughts on this?

**Bastien Revel:** The nature of the crisis is really pushing us in that direction and the response is frankly, to make the most of [this intersection].

Lebanon is actually a middle-income country, but also a highly unequal one, which is why pre-crisis you had development programming. But you also had the concentration of the refugees in the poorest areas of the country. And that means that in those areas, the impact of the crisis is threatening developmental gains and developmental progress.

Refugees are everywhere in the country. They live among the population. So, the interventions that we are trying on the ground, if it’s humanitarian, would impact

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the Lebanese as well [while] development would impact the refugees. That’s what we’ve tried to capitalize on.

We also realized that we couldn’t rely on short-term funding and that we may need to transition from humanitarian assistance, maybe not towards development assistance, but what we would call more resilience or stabilization to address the protracted nature of the crisis, but also to anticipate a transition in funding.

Lebanon has been privileged in the sense that it’s one of the crisis responses that has received the most funding. But we also know that donor fatigue is something we need to anticipate, and that at some point humanitarian funding will shift to another crisis situation. We’ve got, with the LCRP, a plan that integrates both humanitarian and stabilization/resilience in all of the different sectors [and] also, gradual starts into development/stabilization to anticipate a decrease of humanitarian funding in the years to come.

**YJIA:** Could you tell us a bit about the current situation of access to work for Syrian refugees in Lebanon?

**AS:** Legal access to the labor market is very closely tied to their residency in Lebanon. In order to get a residency permit, refugees as of 2015 were required to sign a so-called pledge not to work, which forbids them to undertake any economic activity and which makes working not just informal but illegal. Before that, what we know or what we assume from smaller studies that have taken place is that the majority were working in the agriculture and construction sector, which was already the case prior to the crisis. These two sectors very much depended on Syrian workers as [did] the service industry. And that kind of work has always been predominantly informal.

However, now they’re also working illegally. In addition, because this is fluctuating, seasonal work, it requires a high degree of mobility. They have to go wherever there is a harvest, they have to go wherever there is a construction site. In order to go these places, they have to pass checkpoints in Lebanon, and at these checkpoints, people are checked [for] residency. So they risked detention [and this also] led to child labor, because children under fifteen were not checked at checkpoints, and don’t need a residency permit.

So, in the lead-up to the London conference, there was a lot of advocacy towards the government of Lebanon to change these rules. The government of Lebanon indeed followed through by June 2016 and replaced the pledge not to work by a pledge to abide by Lebanese laws.

However, this didn’t have a massive impact on their legality of working because in order to work legally, you need to have a residency permit. And the managerial security office, [which] is responsible for issuing residency permits, still requests that [applicants] not work or simply does not process applications submitted by male
adults of working age. There is an estimate that around 80 percent of Syrians in the country do not have residency in Lebanon. So, they lack legal status and thus lack any legal access to the labor market.

[Moreover,] Syrians are only allowed to work in three sectors: agriculture, construction, and environment. If they want to work in any other sectors, the employer has to prove that they cannot find a suitable Lebanese for this position.

In essence, the refugees are facing enormous difficulties to access the labor market. The only other option that they have [is] so-called “sponsorship,” which puts them at enormous risks of exploitation because it is a document that only suggests that the employer gets a work permit, but it’s not obligatory nor does it give the worker any rights. There’s also evidence from the region that the refugees are indeed subject to exploitation in the worst cases. There’s even cases of forced and bonded labor being discussed.

YJIA: Could you talk to us a bit about who does not agree that Syrians need to be working in Lebanon, and maybe describe some of their fears?

BR: Lebanon [is] built, as you well know, on this kind of fragile sectarian system, which is a very very delicate balance of representation between the different religious groups and sects. One million Syrians who are predominantly Muslims would really affect the fragile balance. So that’s really the existential fear.

However, what we’ve seen regularly over the years also, and especially more in 2017 compared to the previous years is fears around the Syrians taking Lebanese jobs outside [the] three traditional sectors into other sectors where they’re much more directly [competing] with Lebanese.

YJIA: Do you think that the fear of competition between Syrian and Lebanese workers is justified?

AS: To be very honest with you, we don’t have much evidence either that there is or that there is not [competition] because we simply lack data. The ILO conducted in 2013-14 a small survey on the Syrians to check how many were working etc. We know a little bit from UNHCR data on the Syrians but overall, there isn’t that much.

What we know is that the majority of Syrians are working in the construction and agriculture sector, which are sectors that are historically dependent on this workforce as was often also said by employers’ organizations in the agriculture and construction sector. The competition is very limited in those sectors because the type of labor that the Syrians are doing, which is largely unskilled labor, is not what Lebanese want.
However, we’ve also heard, and this is again anecdotal evidence because we don’t have real data to support this, that Lebanese are more and more willing to go into this unskilled work themselves and that the competition is increasing in the services’ sector, in particular restaurants.

What we know is definitely that, after the refugee crisis, wages, real wages plummeted far below the minimum wage level and working conditions, in particular working hours and protective gear etc. have really plummeted and child labor has increased quite a bit.

**BR**: We’ve done some fairly large perception surveys and it shows us three things. First, eighty percent of the Syrian population in Lebanon is women and children – the active labor force is only a small proportion of the total refugee population. Seventy-five percent of the Syrians who are working work in agriculture or construction. Most Lebanese would work in other sectors so that further diminishes the competition. But still, if you have twenty percent working in other sectors, that’s a big number. And symbolically, it is also very visible and something that communities on the ground notice.

When we do these surveys, we ask people what’s causing tension between communities. And very clearly sixty-five percent of the Lebanese would say that it’s competition for jobs that’s the main source of tensions. And when we ask them if they know of someone who has lost his job to a Syrian, we still have a substantive percent who say yes.

One thing that we tend to forget when we focus too much on the Lebanese-Syrian competition is that the competition is very high between refugees. A lot of employers are playing one Syrian against the other, which in the long term has catastrophic consequences for Lebanon. Even if the crisis stops tomorrow and refugees are able to go back, if you have a practice of underpaying your staff, that will affect Lebanese in the future.

**YJIA**: I would like to now turn to discussing some of the policy solutions. The inter-agency group on access to work was set up to consider some of these dilemmas. Annabella, as ILO was the lead on this, could you tell us about the origins of the group and its purpose?

**AS**: This work started in 2015 as an initiative of UN agencies. In spring 2015, we said we have to agree on how to make this a more sustainable solution. Subsequently, the group was increased to also include INGOs [international non-governmental organization] and donors. In November 2016, a note was finalized, which was then submitted to the humanitarian country team (HCT). The last version is dated July 2017. The document provides common language on these issues.

It simply describes how jobs can be created for both Lebanese and Syrian refugees. It focuses on agriculture, not only because Syrians can work there but also because it was the poorest Lebanese that are to be found in agriculture.
So, it’s been proven a useful tool. To what degree the actual changes that happen on the ground in terms of the legal framework can be attributed to this document site, I wouldn’t dare to say. But I think I would say it’s an important aspect of the overall advocacy by the international community.

And the second one is the construction sector because there is a lot of public infrastructure that definitely needs upgrading and the Lebanese budget is simply not sufficient to cover these costs. You can link it to any economic activities that you are doing and it can be done in a more labor-intensive way than it used to be done. [The] advocacy document lays out how Syrians can fairly access labor in those sectors and how, in turn, Lebanon gets support to make that work.

YJIA: I would like to close by asking you both if there are any lessons that you can draw out from your experience working on this crisis that could be applied to other crises?

BR: Crises by definition are negative events and are shocks on people’s lives. But there is still the possibility of turning a crisis into opportunities because you can access a lot more funding. For that, you often just need to be pragmatic and to make the system work. We fully understand the perspective of the government that refugees can’t stay in the country long term. But within those parameters, if you come together, [the] community can implement [a] new solution.

It was very long and painstaking to do this work, and this advocacy paper, and to have very, very antagonistic meetings with the relevant counterparts. We didn’t speak the same language and didn’t have the same perspective. But the end line is that after two, three years of this work, we’ve just updated the Lebanon crisis response plan for next year, and for the first time the livelihood strategy and the livelihood chapter went through the approvals stages, including all the ministries, without substantive comments.

YJIA: Thank you. Annabella, any final remarks to add to what Bastien has said?

AS: In a similar crisis, the aid coordination structure and the whole aid structures could be rethought. Because what we have at the moment is the UNHCR is very well thought-out and prescribes good policy and programmatic options on how to best support Lebanon and the affected population.

But UNHCR is still seen as a humanitarian tool [with] the livelihood sector being largely non-humanitarian. [Meanwhile] there is still bilateral development aid funding, which is not reported under the UNHCR. This makes it very difficult for both the government and the international community to coordinate, plan together, etc.
So, for me, the biggest lesson learned from the whole crisis response, in addition to what Bastien said, is really that we need to rethink how we coordinate and bring everyone on board.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.
ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES

Annabella Skof is an independent consultant specialised in socio-economic crisis response and recovery, labour market integration of refugees and IDPs and private sector development with more than 15 years experience. Most recently she served for three years as the Socio-Economic Recovery Expert of the ILO’s Regional Office for Arab States and led the Syrian refugee crisis response in Lebanon. Ms. Skof worked with the World Bank, the ILO and Irish Aid in Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands and Tanzania. She holds Master’s degrees in International Relations and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies and in International Economic and Business Studies from the Leopold Franzens Universität Innsbruck.

Bastien Revel has been working for UNDP Lebanon as part of the Inter-Agency Coordination Team for the past four years. Bastien is in charge of the coordination of two of the ten sectors set up in Lebanon as part of the inter-agency coordination structure: social stability and livelihoods. Prior to Lebanon, Bastien worked on local governance and democratization with the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, and on Anti-corruption advocacy and campaigning with the British NGO Global Witness. Bastien holds a Masters’ degree in International Relations from the Institute of Political Science of Grenoble.