



Sister Amira Tabet hugs a Syrian refugee student at the Community Center of the Good Shepherd Sisters in Deir-al-Ahmar. Photo by Ismail Ferdous/CRS

The Missing Link: The Role of Local Institutions in Refugee Response

BACKGROUND AND FRAMING

An unprecedented 68.5 million people are currently displaced globally, including 25.4 million refugees, who spend on average 17 years in exile. Protracted displacement is increasingly the norm for people neither able to return home or resettle in a third country. The humanitarian system cannot keep pace, as refugees increasingly living outside of camps, among host countries and communities. Yet host communities and countries, 85% of which are middle to low income countries themselves, struggle to meet the needs of the displaced while meeting the needs of their own population.

Under this context the global community has convened a series of international fora attempting to transform the humanitarian system to better meet unprecedented needs, while funding and political support are shrinking. The Grand Bargain, the Global Compacts on Refugees, and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework all point to a desire to elevate the role of local institutions in a shared response. Similarly, US-specific reform efforts have made similar refrains towards increasing the role of local actors in providing assistance.

Core to Catholic Relief Services' guiding principles is that of subsidiarity—that local organizations and communities who are closest to the challenges of poverty are also the architects of their own development. Strengthening the capacity of local partner organizations is important for advancing human development, and through its PEER (Preparing to Excel in Emergency Response) project CRS is working to build capacities in program and management quality. The research focuses on local institutions engaged with the PEER project in Lebanon.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Can efforts to strengthen local partners take us farther in our quest to respond to unprecedented global displacement?

METHODOLOGY

A rapid literature review was conducted, followed by primary research in the field with four components:

- i. 7 key informant interviews with directors or deputy directors of local faith institutions
- ii. 7 focus group discussions, including with Syrian refugees
- iii. 5 key informant interviews with staff from UN agencies in Lebanon
- iv. 4 key informant interviews with peer agency experts

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In Lebanon, the benefits of bringing LFIs to the table should not be missed. Despite the Lebanese government's position against the formal integration of refugees, local institutions who are in daily contact with refugees play a significant role in their social acceptance, however informal and unsolicited. As a cohort, LFIs are adept at listening to their community's needs, including them in decision-making, and attuned to addressing needs of both the person and community holistically.

1. LOCAL ACTORS MATTER

The comparative advantage of local institutions, particularly faith institutions are many, and the international humanitarian community has a lot to learn from these institutions- unbound by the same donor requirements, pre-set sector-based responses—able to focus on those in need, including non-physical needs.

Extended presence: LFIs extended presence in the country and the faith-based trust built up amongst local communities are keys to their success. Their extended presence and long-standing relationships, often through direct connections to the broader faith community, have formed organizations that are embedded in and grown from the communities they support.



Syrian refugee patients receive assistance at a temporary medical clinic supported by Caritas Lebanon. Photo courtesy of Sam Tarling for Caritas Switzerland

Attuned to community needs: LFIs are well attuned to the complex needs of their communities, possessing a nuanced understanding of the context, and can trigger emergency assistance rapidly through existing connections. Needs assessments carried out by LFIs, however informal, have allowed them to identify needs and target their assistance to match.

Provide multi-sectoral assistance: LFIs have traditionally provided multi-sectoral assistance (except for specialized medical centres). Often the LFI was the only available resource for the most marginalized members of a community. In providing multiple types of assistance (clothes, cash, fuel, healthcare) based on need, the beneficiary rarely approaches multiple agencies.

Long-term assistance and beneficiaries' dignity: Maintaining dignity in a time of need is critical to the well-being of the beneficiary. Where there is a vacuum in the provision of social assistance by the state, the risk of impoverishment amongst the most

marginalized becomes a reality and LFIs can find themselves the only lifeline.

Rapid, individualized response: When resources are available, LFIs can provide rapid, individualised response. LFIs can play a critical role when refugees face challenges accessing international support, including confusion around available services, services that are provided too far away, or unable to access services due to prohibitive costs.

2. CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IS WORTH THE INVESTMENT

Capacity strengthening is neither a short-term nor uniform procedure and efficacy is best found through tailored, long-term investment in each organization.

Capacity strengthening takes time: The success of PEER lies in the long-term effort of over 3-years, building an essential element of trust, which made LFIs more comfortable opening accounting books, beneficiary rolls and other sensitive documents that

were the subject of internal process improvements through PEER. Despite this lengthy period, gaps still exist in institutions' more complex technical standards.

A model that goes beyond training: Going beyond one-off trainings helps to ensure that capacity and knowledge transfer was institutionalized in organizational policies, practices, and implemented with sufficient leadership, know-how and follow-through. PEER's use of an accompaniment model, including peer-to-peer coaching, mentoring, training, guidance, and field visits was critical to the success of the project and beyond.

Addressing program AND management quality: A detailed and broad range of Finance, Management, Human Resources and Emergency Response procedures and policies were put in place across all 14 LFIs. Focusing on both internal policies, but also educating partners on the international norms and standards were both necessary and complementary, so that LFIs could become viable organizations in terms of accountability, norms and standards.

Enhancing the humanitarian system: The upstream benefits of engaging local civil society in the humanitarian system must be recognized. Strengthened local institutions can only improve the delivery of assistance by the whole system.

Defining their own futures: Strengthened LFIs are now able to engage more strategically and systematically in the humanitarian ecosystem, particularly at the local level. LFIs have been able to develop their engagement and broaden their impact, as well as help define their role in the ongoing humanitarian response.

Unlocking synergies: Through PEER's approach of cross-agency capacity strengthening, LFIs became colleagues rather than unknown strangers and competitors, and enabled opportunities to learn from each other. Participating LFIs were encouraged to

coordinate, share best practices and, in some cases, refer beneficiaries to each other.

3. LOCAL ACTORS IMPROVE REFUGEE RESPONSE AND EXPERIENCE

Local actors have an important role in helping build social acceptance: LFIs carry great leverage and provide a key, grassroots role in influencing the level of social acceptance between Syrians and Lebanese.

LFIs stand as frontline workers providing direct services to people in need, no matter religious affiliation, across their communities. They play a direct role in influencing how refugees are welcomed and accepted in the community, utilizing their shared identities to respond to their beneficiaries, and providing services based on need alone.

Local actors can advocate their governments for better responses: Across the country, LFIs' engagement with, and influence on, the government administration (notably Municipalities) in which they work, media, Social Associations and Unions is possible due to their existing political and religious affiliations.

Local actors can facilitate better connections: LFI leadership and staff are well-respected community members whose presence in the community are recognized as long-standing pillars of support and providers of assistance. Embedded in the community, their contextual knowledge is of great comparative advantage, resulting in a capacity to identify needs and build bridges where outsiders might not.

Local actors support all vulnerable people: With human dignity in mind, LFIs respond to people based on vulnerability rather than status or nationality, something the international community has more recently identified as a best practice.



Young Syrian refugees take part in a “fun day” at a CRS-supported school in Zarqa, Jordan. Photo by Andrew McConnell/CRS

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO ALL STAKEHOLDERS:

Honour the Principles of Partnership (2007) and go deeper with the Grand Bargain (2016)

Moving towards a more holistic, integrated approach will require additional culture and mindset changes on the part of donors, the UN and implementing agencies alike. The process of implementing the Grand Bargain needs to be more inclusive- elevating and carrying out the participation revolution, but also including local institutions, by breaking down barriers that keep local institutions from engaging in the grand bargain.

Engage in pre-crisis mapping of local partners where feasible and elevate the role of local responders.

To facilitate the success of the Grand Bargain approach of localization, pre-crisis identification, mapping and certification of local institutions present in communities who could be supported to participate in the emergency response should be undertaken in disaster-prone areas. This can be done in conjunction with existing DRR planning activities. The map should be utilized to engage local actors at the beginning of a crisis.

Engage local actors in needs assessments.

Including local actors in needs assessment at the beginning of a response can address the needs of refugees more appropriately and holistically. Local

actors are also able to identify community needs, addressing aspects of social acceptance and other softer needs that have not traditionally been captured by the international community.

Design innovative partnership modalities.

Designing new partnership modalities that account for the unique and specific capabilities of local institutions and help reduce existing barriers to their inclusion can help ensure greater involvement of such actors. They should be built with a long-term time frame in mind, which will not only help build capacity over time, but allow for building trust and understanding for greater efficiencies. Donors can help facilitate piloting such approaches, including public-private partnerships, to help drive innovation and help produce further evidence and learning.

Build more evidence around the role of local institutions.

Understanding the true extent of local institutions in humanitarian and refugee response can help to further elevate their importance and make the case for strengthening their work through capacity building. Relevant research institutions, including local universities, should decide on common indicators and targeted research topics to better leverage the role of local institutions.

TO DONORS (INCLUDING SUB-GRANTOR INGOs WHERE APPLICABLE):

Invest in capacity strengthening before the emergency onset stage, and through development channels.

Comprehensive refugee responses should include capacity development as part and parcel of a long-term response, through long-term, multi-year funding. Prioritizing strong local institutions at the start and throughout a comprehensive refugee response

increases the likelihood for refugees to carry out a normal way of life within their host community.

Invest in local institutions and treat them as true partners.

Increase the level of humanitarian funding going as directly as possible to local and national responders to improve outcomes for affected people. A critical aspect of this objective is ensuring increased funding covers local organizations' indirect costs, which are essential towards enhancing local and national actors' ability to strengthen their internal standards of programming, transparency and overall accountability of humanitarian programming. Contractual partnership agreements should provide the same support to local organizations as is received by INGOs. INGOs who are providing sub-grants to local institutions should follow suit.

Develop clear capacity strengthening strategies which includes an increase in support for multi-year investments in the institutional capacities of local and national responders.

The metric for localization should not solely be direct funding to local institutions, but include necessary steps to achieving this goal, including increased funding for multi-year capacity strengthening initiatives that address both program and management quality. Creating pathways for achieving localization will reduce the binary nature of our understanding of localization and demonstrate over time the value of processes including mentorship and accompaniment, rather than solely one-off trainings. Reporting for such outcomes will frame localization with more achievable milestones.



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Catholic Relief Services 228 W. Lexington Street, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA
For more information, contact ics@crs.org.