
The Role of Local Government in Addressing the Impact of Syrian Refugees: Jordan Case Study

Amman, Jordan

2–3 June 2015

In partnership with the Identity Center and the Columbia Global Centers |
Middle East (Amman)

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Introduction

The following is a summary of a workshop co-hosted by Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme, the Identity Center, and the Columbia Global Centers | Middle East (Amman). More than 4 million refugees have fled the war in Syria to date, according to the UN. Most are being hosted by the neighbouring states in areas that were already facing significant economic and social challenges. The refugee crisis has placed considerable pressure on the national governments and local authorities that are attempting to manage the impact on local communities.

This workshop, held in Amman on 2–3 June 2015, convened local officials, civil society, academics and think-tank analysts to discuss the Jordanian case and what role local government can play in addressing the impact of Syrian refugees, particularly in those areas where Syrian refugees are concentrated. Discussions were informed by the concurrent national debate regarding draft municipalities and decentralization laws under review in the Jordanian parliament. The concluding session included a consultation with national policy-makers and donor representatives.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule,¹ and the views expressed are those of the participants. This summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire to those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

Key points that emerged from the discussion are summarized as follows:

- Better provision of services to host communities and Syrian refugees, as well as increased engagement with both, would improve social cohesion in the refugee-concentrated areas of Jordan. But municipalities are faced with significant constraints in being able to fulfil their responsibilities.
- The refugee crisis has exacerbated what was already a bad situation. Nearly all of the constraints preventing municipalities from better addressing the impact of the refugee crisis are related to problems that existed prior to the Syria crisis, such as bureaucratic hurdles, lack of capacity among staff, and insufficient means of obtaining financial resources.
- These factors are compounded by the absence of political will in the Jordanian central government to decentralize the allocation of financial and human resources to municipalities or to remove the highly centralized oversight of their operations. This is partly due to central government concerns about municipal capacity, as well as a consequence of the general security environment in the country.
- Municipal leaders also had differing views on what the role of a municipality should be. There was no consensus on whether their sole mandate should be service delivery, or if, given the right circumstances, they should also be involved in promoting local economic development and social cohesion.
- Trust issues between municipalities, ministries and civil society organizations also hinder effective cooperation in addressing the impacts of refugees. A lack of trust means that policy decisions that municipalities believe would help their efforts are less likely to be taken.

¹ 'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed'.

Context

The impact of Syrian refugees on host communities will have growing implications for stability in Jordan in the coming years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that inequality is increasing in the areas where refugees are concentrated: the poorest have been the worst hit by price increases and downward pressure on wages. Residents are concerned that the next five years will see a significant increase in criminality, particularly among youth, including a further proliferation of weapons and drugs use. There are demonstrations and sometimes riots in refugee camps in response to water and flour shortages. Despite attempts by donors and aid organizations to implement conflict-sensitive programming, there remains a perception among some locals that programmes are not conflict-sensitive enough, and that support is unfairly prioritized for Syrians.

Workshop participants expressed concerns that social tensions will increase, particularly given the presence of Syrians, Iraqis and Palestinians, including those from different sects to the majority Sunni Jordanian population. Meanwhile, Jordanian security forces are overstretched by the need to guard the Syrian–Jordanian border and maintain security in the refugee camps.

There was widespread agreement that social relations between Syrians and host communities will become significantly more tense in the coming years, as the status of employment, education and resource usage worsens or is perceived to worsen as a result of the refugees. The increased presence of Syrians, Iraqis and Palestinians, including from different sects, will contribute to this. Tense social relations are unlikely, however, to lead to civil conflict such as that found in Jordan’s neighbours.

Local authorities have the potential to play a greater role in addressing these impacts and in benefiting from the positive impacts of the refugee presence. Better provision of services to host communities and refugees, as well as increased engagement with both, would improve social cohesion. However, participants argued that the current situation is such that that Jordanians whose public services have been affected by the refugee presence have little trust in their local authorities. A number of participants pointed to the probability that Syrian refugees are likely to remain in Jordan for as long as another 15–25 years. Without a shift in mentality and approach as to how the refugee-concentrated areas are governed, it is likely that quality of life and state–society relations in these areas in particular will deteriorate even further in coming years.

Improving local authorities’ ability to address refugee impacts

The workshop sessions focused on ways to empower Jordanian municipalities, which are on the ‘front line’ of providing for host communities. It emerged that nearly all of the constraints preventing municipalities from better addressing the impact of refugees are related to problems that existed prior to the Syria crisis, such as bureaucratic hurdles, lack of capacity among staff, and insufficient means of obtaining financial resources. In other words, the refugee crisis has exacerbated what was already a bad situation. However, a few participants argued that the aid response to the refugee crisis has enabled municipalities to have more resources and capacity-building opportunities than ever before. Municipal leaders also had differing views on what the role of a municipality should be. There was no consensus on whether their sole mandate should be service delivery, or if given the right circumstances they should also be involved in promoting local economic development and social cohesion.

Working groups focused on ways to overcome constraints that face local authorities and other policy actors when they attempt to support host communities dealing with the impacts of the refugee crisis. One participant with expertise in the Syrian refugee situation in Lebanon mentioned that personal leadership

is also an important factor: individual mayors with vision, initiative and perseverance have proved able to be much more effective at maintaining good service delivery and engaging with their communities.

Overcoming regulatory constraints

Regulatory constraints were seen to be among the largest obstacles to municipalities being able to be more effective in supporting host communities. As regards improving service delivery, many of the participants considered that the most useful policy would be to reduce the bureaucratic hurdles that currently make it difficult for them to carry out their responsibilities: many of the municipalities' decisions require sign-off from a ministry in Amman, and often even from the prime minister's office. Participants gave examples of needing approval from the prime minister's office in order to hire drivers for refuse trucks, which can take over four months; needing approval from the prime minister's office in order to dismiss municipal employees who are on a permanent contract; and needing approval from the relevant ministry in Amman for various types of expenditure. Participants recommended removing a number of these requirements for ministerial approval over municipal work, as well as generally speeding up the approvals process. Participants further recommended that municipal unions be legalized in Jordan, which would better enable sharing of best practices and cooperation among municipalities.

A number of the participants also expressed the view that being able to hire Syrian workers would help municipalities meet their labour shortages for delivering certain services. They recommended that it be made legal for municipalities to be able to hire non-Jordanians as waste collection workers and street cleaners. One participant argued that Syrian refugees who receive aid support should not be eligible to work.

Overcoming financial and capacity constraints

Municipalities, particularly those in areas where refugees are concentrated, are in very high levels of debt. Many services are running at deficit. In addition to calling for more funding from the government to the municipalities that are hosting Syrian refugees, participants argued that the central government should allocate funding to municipalities on the basis of their development needs rather than on the basis of their taxation revenue, as is currently the case. It was further recommended that municipalities be better enabled to access their own forms of income. In addition to better enforcement of tax laws, municipalities can be given access to specially zoned land that would provide an income. Participants also recommended that municipalities be given the right to enter into public-private partnerships without approval from Amman for investment projects, which would follow agreed guidelines subject to clear and transparent legislation.

A number of municipalities' financial constraints, such as having limited funding from international donors, are related to insufficient capacity. It was widely agreed that municipalities usually do not have qualified staff who are able to fundraise for international aid or who fulfil donor requirements for technical expertise when there is interest in giving funding. Staff are often hired on the basis of personal connections, and do not prioritize self-development even when given training opportunities. Donors who work with municipalities are increasingly frustrated with the lack of capacity, particularly given that a large amount of funding was allocated around a decade ago to capacity-building for municipalities in Jordan.

Participants recommended that municipalities follow a stricter approach to sending the appropriate staff members to training workshops, as well as improving accountability measures in all local authorities to minimize the use of personal connections when hiring. It was also recommended that municipalities

should create a new position of administrative and financial assistant, who would be hired for his or her technical credentials and would serve as a senior deputy to the mayor on these matters.

Overcoming political and legal constraints

The political constraints to municipalities being better able to address refugee impacts are also significant. It was felt that there is an absence of political will in the central government to decentralize the allocation of financial and human resources to municipalities or to remove the highly centralized oversight of their operations. This is partly due to central government concerns about capacity in municipalities. Security concerns about overspill from the war in Syria and the potential existence of terrorist ‘ sleeper cells ’ in the country also contribute to a political environment in which the central government continues to want significant oversight of local authorities’ activities. In addition, it was noted that all policy decisions related to Syrian refugees are made by the central government.

Trust issues between various Jordanian stakeholders also hinder effective cooperation in addressing the impacts of refugees. A lack of trust means that policy decisions that municipalities believe would help their efforts are less likely to be taken. Numerous participants spoke of a mutual lack of trust between municipalities and ministries in Amman, as well as of a lack of trust between civil society organizations and municipalities.

Participants’ policy recommendations focused on legal measures or amendments related to the draft decentralization law. It was agreed that the law is missing important guarantees for women’s participation. One participant also noted that some Jordanians’ objections to the draft decentralization law relate to their concerns over identity issues, namely that decentralization could actually lead to the eventual naturalization of Syrians. Participants recommended that in order to address this, a refugee law should be passed to clarify refugees’ legal status. This would not only help refugees’ rights be observed but could also help allay fears that Syrians will eventually become naturalized Jordanian citizens.

The benefits of empowering municipalities

An increase in financial resources, capacity and administrative autonomy for municipalities would improve service delivery for host communities. An improvement in locals’ public services would contribute to, though not entirely determine, improved social cohesion between host communities and Syrians.

Participants stated that the benefits of empowered municipalities would also be felt by local communities beyond the effects of refugees. Some municipal representatives argued that if municipalities had the capacity and funding to cover their basic service delivery mandates, they would also then be able to work on local development by means of investment projects aimed at increasing municipal revenue and creating jobs. They argued they would also focus on efficiency measures to limit future expenditures such as installing solar energy lighting and improvement management of waste. One participant disagreed with this aim, arguing that municipalities are meant to be service providers and not development agencies. Participants also noted the ‘ virtuous cycle ’ created by improved capacity: greater municipal capacity means that municipalities are better able to work with donors, which in turn brings in more resources. One participant also considered that if municipalities were able to take a more active role in local development, parliamentarians who are often involved in local projects would have more time to focus on national legislation. It was also remarked that part of the reason for parliamentary resistance to the empowering of municipalities might be that it would affect MPs’ ability to attract popular support by distributing services and contracts.

Municipalities – and mayors in particular – also play a role in managing community relations, including outreach to local Jordanian communities and also building better relations with Syrian refugees. One participant commented that municipal leaders can also at times take the role of tribal representatives. Participants spoke of the need to manage expectations within the community, adding that many people, especially youth, do not understand the actual role of a municipality and how limited its budget is; rather, they think that municipalities are ‘the solution to all of life’s problems’.

One participant gave an example of a successful initiative in Zaatari village, in which the municipality has good relations with refugees and holds regular meetings with them. It was noted that the central government places restrictions on cooperation initiatives aimed at bringing together local authorities, Syrian refugees and civil society. If such projects are to receive foreign funding, they are required to go through a lengthy approval process with, for example, the ministry of social development, which ultimately requires sign-off from the prime minister’s office. Others put forward the view that it is more the role of civil society, rather than municipalities, to work on social cohesion issues.

The Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative

Chatham House’s Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative is a multi-year research and convening project that aims to support a coordinated and holistic policy response to the conflict in Syria and its long-term regional implications, with a particular focus on the country’s immediate neighbours.

<http://www.chathamhouse.org/syriaandneighbours>

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