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Global Asylum
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ASILE TASK FORCE – SUMMARY NOTE

THE JORDAN COMPACT, COVID-19, AND REFUGEE LABOUR RIGHTS

14 SEPTEMBER 2022

Jointly Organized by

DRD DANISH
REFUGEE
COUNCIL



The protracted nature of the displacement of Syrian refugees has led to policy and practice challenges for the Government of Jordan, international donor governments, international aid organisations, and Jordanian civil society in providing pathways for durable solutions for refugees and in supporting and providing opportunity for host populations.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the economic situation into focus in Jordan, with people from all backgrounds seeking income-generating opportunities, (perceptions of) competition between different groups creating a risk to social cohesion and potentially protection space, and the informal nature of the labour market being brought to the fore.

Within this environment, the Jordan Compact has become quite heavily focussed on formalisation, even though some of the policy interventions have mirrored informal labour market practices, for example temporary or flexible work permits in practice often provide only limited access to stable, formal work. Meanwhile, many workers (whether Jordanian, Syrian refugees, or others) and employers prefer to utilise informal systems, which provide flexibility and avoid registrations with social security and other state systems. Some refugees fear that accessing the formal labour market might limit or remove their access to aid assistance, which may be difficult to get back if their formal employment ends. Therefore, having only a temporary access to formal employment is seen by some as undesirable.

Participants also noted that the length of displacement of Syrian refugees was not predicted in 2011 and 2012, which led to policy and practice decisions being taken at the onset of the crisis that perhaps were not suited to a lengthier time in displacement, or indeed where people's experiences of displacement change – for example now a generation of children have had a heavily disrupted education. Participants expected that the most likely scenario was Syrians remaining in displacement for another five to ten years, which meant policy discussions should be considering this dynamic. It was welcomed that this discussion was possible in Jordan, which is not the case in many other contexts, and is not something that should be taken for granted.

As part of this discussion, it is imperative that stakeholders consider programme interventions that can support all durable solutions. For example, limiting education access in Jordan for Syrian refugees will act not only as a barrier to return, but also a barrier for any potential rebuilding of Syria following a political solution to the conflict, and would increase the fragility of the future state. If the Syrian economy is unable to rebuild, or public infrastructure remains heavily damaged, destroyed, and inefficient, there is a higher chance of continued displacement from Syria.

Participants also discussed that while policy debates largely centred on Syrian refugees, there were efforts to take a 'one refugee approach' in the country. Jordan hosts refugees of other nationalities, many of whom have not been able to access the same assistance or access to the labour market provided to refugees from Syria. It was noted that registering as a refugee in Jordan was significantly more of a challenge as a 'non-Syrian'. This results in a different protection space for 'non-Syrian' refugees and different needs, which should be considered in policy discussions and practice.

In engaging displacement-affected populations in aid assistance programmes, participants discussed approaches to assessing vulnerability, how the term translates into Arabic, and how such assessments correspond with beneficiary selection and programme design. A range of understandings of vulnerability are offered by different organisations and, as in other terminology used



The ASILE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870787



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in assistance, there is no 'neat' translation of the term, which results in aid organisations utilising different expressions, which may mean a variety of different things to the populations whose needs they are assessing. Indeed, the aid community itself does not have a standard definition of the term in English, with some organisations focusing on a socio-economic lens – that is at times conflated with poverty - and others using much wider or more specific and narrower definitions.

It was discussed how much this mattered in practice, but also that it could affect accountability and also targeting strategies – and might call into question whether populations even understood that their vulnerability was being assessed, even though the term is heavily used in English as part of assessment reports, programme design, and targeting strategies. It was also noted that some aid organisations do not use the term 'vulnerability' with people of concern, but then write assessment documents that focus on analysis of vulnerability.

The aid community's use of different expressions was also seen as important due to the variety of barriers to access to the labour market for various groups, including refugees and young people (Jordanian, Syrian, or other nationalities) – ranging from closed sectors of the economy for certain population groups and a lack of awareness of job opportunities; combined with other structural barriers, for example poor shelter conditions or the lack of access to documentation. One example is that some refugees are unable to obtain a driving license – if someone is highly skilled and could contribute value within the labour market, not being permitted to drive prevents them from entering into the labour market. These barriers are combined with often limited aid assistance that focuses on the short-term and is too often connecting educated youth with inappropriate economic opportunities.

Participants discussed the need to reconsider how programmes focussing on youth populations are designed to support their ambitions. For example, by providing access to a broader range of skills development and career counselling that can also connect to global labour market opportunities. There is also a need to ensure that young people are fully aware of opportunities that already exist – for example there is career counselling, but many do not access it as they are not aware of its existence and/or potential.

COVID-19 has limited people's income generating activities in multiple ways. For some, jobs were lost as a direct result of the economic downturn during the pandemic, others had a temporary loss of access to employment that they were not able to regain. Women were disproportionately affected. However, in providing support post-pandemic there is the potential to cause tension between displaced and host communities if support is not seen as available to all, or if – for example – refugees are seen as being given preferential access to employment opportunities. However, participants also noted that during lockdowns those in the formal labour market had significantly greater access to support, and this had encouraged the registration of businesses.

Participants noted the link here with the broader economic context – the Jordanian economy (which has limited natural resources available) may not be able to provide economic opportunities for all, including a large displaced population. While these considerations were acknowledged and seen to be valid, different policy approaches from the Government of Jordan could also open up economic opportunity. Participants noted the need for complementary pathways (e.g., educational opportunities abroad) and resettlement schemes to be provided.

Participants noted that the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (triple nexus) was not a new concept and had been discussed in the Jordanian context since 2015, however insufficient progress on triple nexus outcomes was being achieved. Further discussion and interrogation of the barriers to delivering on the triple nexus was important, as practitioners and policy makers needed to understand what was preventing success. Participants noted that donor programmes were often complex and contradictory, rather than complementary; and that coordination between donors would also be needed to simplify objectives and deliver tangible outcomes for targeted populations. It was also noted that attracting increased funding without global media attention was a challenge, but equally that sensationalist media attention might lead to unintended negative consequences, for example host populations perceiving refugees to be receiving additional support and worsening social cohesion.

Participants also discussed that the Government of Jordan has made significant reforms during the eleven years of the crisis in Syria, including in their internal structures, and that much had been achieved in improving the situation for Jordanians and Syrian refugees. This should be built upon in future discussions and policy interventions.