

ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON AND THEIR EMPLOYMENT PROFILE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in Syria as a result of the ongoing crisis has forced thousands of Syrians to flee and seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Lebanon. According to UNHCR estimates, by early 2014 Lebanon was a host to 927,638 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, of whom 879,907 are registered with the UNHCR, representing around 21 per cent of the total population in the country. While Lebanon is neither a signatory to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol, the government maintains an “open border” policy whereby registered Syrian refugees can live and work in Lebanon. This implies a significant social economic impact on Lebanon, including an impact on the labour market.

In order to assess this impact and identify the ramifications of an increasing number of Syrian refugees (many of whom will be seeking work) the ILO implemented an assessment of their impact and a survey of their employment status in four regions (Akkar, Tripoli, Beqaa, and the South). The objective was to provide a better understanding of the evolving situation of increasing numbers of Syrian refugees. The study focused on the employment profile of refugees and the potential impact of their economic participation on their host communities’ livelihoods. For the current assessment, data was collected from 400 households, which included a total of 2,004 individuals. Semi-structured questionnaires were completed using personal interviews that covered all household members.

The assessment revealed a number of salient findings and confirmed, to a large extent, the anecdotal evidence about the living conditions of Syrian refugees and their effect on host communities. The majority of Syrian refugees are living in difficult socio-economic conditions with limited livelihood resources. Initially, many refugees settled with families or friends but, with the prolonged crisis, they have resorted to rented accommodation where they are mostly obliged to pay high prices for small shelters, or shared apartments with other families. The alternative is to move to Palestinian camps, abandoned buildings, or tented settlements.

The assessment shows that the majority of Syrian refugees are youth and children. More than half are below the age of 24. Educational attainment of the refugees is generally low; one out of three is either illiterate or never attended school, 40 per cent have a primary education, and only three per cent achieved university education. Males and females seem to have similar education levels. In terms of school attendance in Lebanon, a large share of Syrian school age children remain out of school, with the enrolment rate estimated at only 31 per cent. Syrian refugee students face multiple obstacles, including the inability to afford school fees, school accessibility, as well as curriculum and language differences.

In terms of employment, results indicate that around half of the working age refugees (47 per cent) are economically active, the majority of whom were active in Syria prior to the crisis. South

Lebanon records the highest activity rate and Akkar the lowest. Syrian refugees are characterised by high unemployment levels, most notably amongst women at 68 per cent. Given the absence of male heads in most refugee households, there is an impetus for women to seek work. However, they still face the additional burden of childcare, which impedes them from employment. In fact, out of all the Syrian refugee women aged above 15 years, only six per cent are currently working in Lebanon.

As workers, Syrians are mainly engaged in agriculture or in personal and domestic services and, on a smaller scale, in construction. These jobs provide little income and no security or protection, reflecting refugees' low skill capacities. The assessment shows that refugees tend to maintain the same kinds of jobs they used to occupy before the crisis. Most refugees work informally whereby 92 per cent have no work contract and over half (56 per cent) work on a seasonal, weekly or daily basis; only 23 per cent earn regular monthly wages.

Syrian refugees have an average monthly income of LBP418,000, with a median of LBP 450,000 a month. There is a significant gender gap, as females earn 40 per cent less than males. The lowest average monthly incomes were found in Akkar and Tripoli; the highest reported in the South. The low wages are somehow complimented with other sources of income; 36 per cent stated they have other sources of income – relying mainly on UNHCR assistance or personal savings.

The survey results show that, on average, refugees took 74 days to find work. While it would take 118 days for a refugee to find work in Tripoli and 97 days in Akkar, it takes around 30 days to find work in the South. Personal networking seems to be an important factor in job seeking as 40 per cent of working refugees found work through a Syrian acquaintance and 36 per cent through a Lebanese acquaintance.

Poor occupational health and safety takes its toll on Syrian refugees. The data show that many workers suffer from one or more work-related health conditions or are exposed to hazards at the workplace. One out of two workers reported suffering from back or joint pain or severe fatigue; 60 per cent are exposed to dust and fumes, and 49 per cent to extreme cold or heat. A low percentage (12 per cent) of workers have faced some sort of conflict at work, mainly a result of a personal clash; if a conflict took place, most stated they did not take any action.

Finally, very few workers (16 per cent) expressed a need for training to build capacity at work, while a larger number (50 per cent) required tools or equipment. Construction and agricultural tools were needed by males whereas females noted the need for sewing, hairdressing, and agricultural equipment.

According to various research and official figures, the Syrian crisis has had negative repercussions on the economy and the labour market. Economic growth has slowed, private investments reduced, the trade deficit has expanded, and real estate and tourism – the two most important sectors – have declined. The Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees into poor communities in the peripheral regions of Lebanon have imposed enormous challenges on the country in general and on host communities in particular.

The assessment also included focus group meetings with workers and employers in the North and Bekaa, which highlighted a number of repercussions of the continuous inflow of refugees:

- Syrian refugees are mainly concentrated in peripheral areas that are historically poor and deprived, thereby exacerbating their already difficult living conditions.
- Competition over job opportunities is one of the most, if not the most, urgent challenges facing host communities. The employment situation has worsened with the increase in labour supply. Syrian workers are accepting lower incomes, work for longer hours and without social benefits; this has led to decreasing wages and a reduction of job

opportunities. Lebanese employers and business owners are, however, benefiting from the availability of less costly labour.

In addition, a number of micro and small Syrian-owned businesses are opening up in the host regions. These enterprises sell goods (originating in Syria) at lower prices and thus pose a threat to equivalent Lebanese businesses.

- Prices of basic commodities and services have soared. The increase in demand for rented accommodation has raised rental prices drastically. This price inflation is attributed to an increase in demand due to population growth, the injection of cash and food/cash vouchers, and the reduced access to cheaper goods from Syria.
- Overcrowding in host communities is placing additional pressure on already deficient healthcare and education services, in terms of access and quality. Both sectors are under a great deal of pressure to cope with the huge emerging inflow of refugees.

A number of guiding recommendations have been made that address the above challenges and aim to contribute to improving the employment and livelihood opportunities of both Syrian refugees and their host communities. The main conclusion is that any support should address the needs of the Lebanese communities in parallel to the needs of the refugees. The types of support recommended include a focus on local job creation while also improving overall labour market governance in Lebanon in order to avoid further deteriorating working conditions. Such support could include job creation programmes and enhanced access to employment through cash-for-work programmes, financial support, local economic development and emergency employment centres. Other interventions could involve policy formulation while strengthening institutional capacity to protect Lebanese and Syrian workers from exploitation. There is a need to implement capacity building through skills enhancement programmes, extending labour market information and statistics, and developing special programmes that target women, youth and children.