CASE STUDY SERIES
LESSONS LEARNED FROM SFCG LEBANON COMBINED APPROACHES

SOCIAL COHESION PROGRAMMING
IN A CONTEXT OF MAJOR REFUGEE INFLUX CRISIS

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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
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This case study is the first in a series aiming to highlight Search for Common Ground - Lebanon’s (Search) findings, lessons learned and best practices in its efforts to strengthen social cohesion. In the current context where instability in the Middle East has caused unprecedented numbers of refugees and migrants to resettle in the region and beyond, there is a strong need to build on lessons learned and examples from practitioners on the ground. In the Middle East and in Europe especially, where many seek refuge, a growing fear of “the other” has created increasingly divided societies, urging practitioners to identify and address the underlying factors behind these fears. Search’s work shows that fears often emerge from prejudices and lack of interaction and can be mitigated through relationship building between different groups. Therefore, this case study will provide a first set of answers from lessons learned to the following question:

How do we create local response mechanisms to address high numbers and protracted influx of refugees and the resulting tensions between refugees and host communities in order to ensure resilience and social stability in the longer term?

INTRODUCTION: WHY SOCIAL COHESION?

In March 2011, the Syrian uprising was following the course of the Arab Spring(s). Hopes and fears of the Syrian population grew in parallel as the security situation was rapidly deteriorating. Quickly, the first refugees started arriving to neighbouring Lebanon seeking safety and shelter while waiting for the situation to calm down and allowing them to go back to their homes. Five years later, an estimated almost two million Syrians are residing in Lebanon.

At first, Lebanese communities had been overall welcoming, empathising with the harsh situation of Syrians refugees, but the impact of hosting more than one million out-of-camps refugees on the already fragile and unstable Lebanese society has been creating more tensions between the two communities every day. Old stereotypes resurface, and new prejudices appear. Anxiety of the Lebanese people is growing, “Lebanon will not be able to accommodate these large numbers; we are also afraid of the security situation because as the Syrian numbers grow, problems increase.”1 Syrian’s disempowerment and frustrations are increasing in parallel, as expressed by a Syrian participant of the project who lived in Lebanon prior to the Syrian conflict: “From 2003 till 2011, the relationship between Syrians and Lebanese was perfect. When the conflict happened in 2011 things went downhill.”2

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Lebanon kept an open-border policy that led this country of approximately 4 million inhabitants to see its population increase by 30% in four years. Today, Lebanon is hosting the highest number of refugees per capita in the world (almost one in three people in Lebanon is a refugee).

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1 Focus Group Discussion with Lebanese females, South Lebanon, December 2013.
2 Abdallah, Syrian project’s participant, South Lebanon, August 2014.
The Government of Lebanon’s (GoL) policy to not establish camps for the Syrian refugees has led them to settle in urban and rural areas among the Lebanese communities who have been overall welcoming and providing support at the outset of the crisis but are now further pushed into poverty, with an estimated 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese.

Several research studies have increasingly shown how the prolonged presence of such a high number of refugees does not only put a severe strain on resources, but also leads to rising tensions among host communities and refugees. Not expecting such a protracted crisis and trying to deal with the most pressing needs of the refugees, the initial international response was purely humanitarian and targeted to Syrian nationals only, failing to not harm the already fragile and shocked Lebanese system and the relations between the refugees and their host communities. Although acts of physical violence remain isolated, long lasting prejudices and low levels of communication and interaction between both communities are increasingly leading to misunderstandings, growing fears and lack of trust, which create fertile ground for future conflicts to escalate. This illustrates the need to mainstream social cohesion in an effort to improve the relationships between the multiple groups that are part of the society. The quality of the relationships between these groups “can be evaluated along the dimensions of mutual respect and trust, shared values and social participation, life satisfaction and happiness as well as structural equity and social justice.”

In 2014, the Government of Lebanon took the lead, with the support of international actors, to design a more comprehensive response plan that will answer to humanitarian, development and social stability needs of both the Lebanese population and the refugees. Still, social cohesion initiatives remain highly sensitive as they presuppose a long-term vision and strategy, thereby acknowledging that the refugees might not return any time soon. Therefore, in doing so, refugees would be considered members of the society, establishing the need to build long-term trusting relationships and cooperation between refugees and host communities in order to avoid further segregation and tensions that could result in violence.

3 It is important to mention the Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, hence the limited legal protection for refugees and asylum seekers.
4 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) 2015-2016
5 UNDP ACT, July 2013
SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND APPROACH

Search’s mission is to transform the way individuals and societies deal with conflict -- from adversarial approaches to a more cooperative solution -- by building capacities, relationships and systems that prevent the resort to violence.

Search established an office in Lebanon in 2008 to address Lebanon-specific issues, mainly linked to the sectarian aspects of the society and state institutions. When Syrian refugees started to flow into Lebanon, Search raised its concerns about social cohesion to international actors, but the humanitarian needs were so enormous that it took almost two years for donors to finally recognise the need to fund peacebuilding work alongside humanitarian assistance.

Since then and in line with Search’s overall objective to promote healthy societies able to deal with conflicts without resorting to violence, the Lebanon office has been implementing several projects adopting different approaches to strengthen social cohesion between the different components of the Lebanese society:

1. Dialogue and joint initiatives led by Joint Committees composed of Lebanese and Syrian members.
2. Arts-based approach providing a safe space for Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian youth to develop trusting relationships and self-confidence and to experience joint artistic creation.
3. Out-of-school activities focusing on basic and intermediate English language skills and conflict transformation skills through stories reading, roleplaying and recreational activities for Lebanese and Syrian children.
4. Livelihood initiatives to increase economic opportunities for young Lebanese and Syrians through the design and implementation of joint projects.

At the end of 2013, Search started its first pilot social cohesion project between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees in 11 different communities spread over the South of the country and in the city of Tripoli in the North. This first social cohesion project engaged Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities in a process that developed cooperative community-led solutions to mitigate tensions and improve social stability.

In order to illustrate its findings, the case study will provide an overview of the initial conflict analysis, the theory of change and the project’s activities. The second part of the study will focus on four main lessons learned that have emerged from the project’s implementation and evaluation:

1. The approach should be holistic
2. The approach needs to be community driven and flexible
3. Local initiatives should build on existing structures and networks
4. Capacity building, outreach and visibility components should be integrated and fine-tuned according to the participants’ and communities’ needs

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6 Funded by UNHCR and the EU.
DIALOGUE AND JOINT COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

INCEPTION PHASE OF THE PROJECT

Any influx of refugees presents a shock for the refugees themselves and for the communities hosting them, a shock that if not dealt with appropriately will result in increasing tensions, potentially leading to violence. Nonetheless, each context and community has its own specificities, making it essential, prior to the implementation of any social cohesion activities, to understand the drivers for conflict escalation and to build on the potential drivers for peace that might differ from one community to the other. To this aim, at the end of 2013, Search Lebanon conducted a wide conflict assessment in the 11 target communities in order to reveal the real and perceived factors fueling resentment and misperceptions and to identify potential positive factors on which to build social cohesion. The assessment also allowed the approach to be tailored to the specific social and political contexts of each community.

The perceived or actual lack of employment opportunities, general poverty as well as lack of access to affordable housing and services are deemed to be the main sources of division between refugees and host communities. The assessment also showed that even though the potential drivers for conflict might stem from economic issues, a solution that only targets the dire economic situation of the most vulnerable would not necessarily be the most effective means of minimizing the tensions between Lebanese and Syrians. The recommendation of the assessment was to provide a space for Lebanese and Syrians to interact, a space where their perceptions and prejudices of each other could be challenged and transformed.

The conflict assessment indicated that most of the resentment and prejudices between the two groups mostly stem from rumours, rather than actual individual experiences. Therefore, to address the tensions, it is essential to break the physical and mental barriers between the two communities. This is why the project approach provided a safe space for Lebanese and Syrians to meet and go through a dialogue process with the aim of jointly analysing their community needs and developing joint initiatives to address these problems. By allowing the participants to contextualise the identified issues in their local community, the project led them to articulate issues in their community as shared problems to which only joint solutions can be developed and sustained, thus, acknowledging the need for collaboration in the implementation of these solutions.

THEORY OF CHANGE

With the aim of establishing dialogue and building sustainable relationships that would enable community members to address rising communal tensions, the approach combined change at different levels.

Following the conflict assessment, the project kicked off with an identification of key community entry points and a preparation phase that included preliminary meetings between the project team and individuals first, then with a few participants particularly eager to play a positive role in their community. Following this phase, the project team organised a series of roundtable (RTs) discussions providing a safe space for Lebanese and Syrians to meet and voice their common needs. In parallel with capacity building on non-violent communication (NVC), the process led to the creation of Joint Committees (JCs) responsible of the implementation of Joint Community activities (JCAs) to be carried out by the two groups.

HOLISTIC APPROACH

As previously mentioned, one of the main potential drivers of conflict between refugees and host communities is caused by the experienced or perceived competition for economic opportunities. While this project was not directly focused on these economic issues, a holistic approach that takes into consideration the multiple dimensions of the crisis that are affecting directly or indirectly social cohesion was necessary. That is the reason why this kind of project should base its intervention at the intersection of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. This meant bringing together Syrians and Lebanese through a successful dialogue process in order to break the ice between the two groups and identify common needs. This allows the two groups to reach a common ground in which trusting relationships and fruitful collaboration can grow, but it also raises the participants’ expectations of Search to provide tangible solutions. These solutions were not always possible to implement within the boundaries of a peacebuilding project, and, therefore, a holistic approach that incorporates humanitarian response, a long-term development vision with social cohesion efforts is highly recommended.
In a context of major refugee influx crisis, Social Cohesion Programming demands more cooperation on the ground between the different actors in order to integrate social cohesion efforts within humanitarian and development programs that will benefit both Syrian and Lebanese communities in the long term. Search sought to fill this need by supporting the Joint Committees’ efforts to establish themselves as a primary contact point between the communities, local authorities and other organizations (or service providers) working in the area. Search Project Coordinator in Tripoli shared how this approach was successful: "For example, in one of the target community, this resulted in an international organisation resuming its work after the Lebanese had made it stop out of frustration and provided the local community with sewage systems, answering to the needs of both Lebanese and Syrians".

Jointly developed solutions to common problems based on an inclusive process will furthermore ensure continuously committed participants by not only offering a safe space for Lebanese and Syrians to meet, but also by allowing them to take ownership of the improvement of their living conditions. While ensuring socio-economic empowerment to meet participants’ needs, it must be stressed that the social cohesion component of such a project is crucial to avoid further divides. A recent case study from Mercy Corps in Lebanon also strengthened this argument as it showed how improved access to services (i.e. health, schools, sanitary) does not necessarily result in better relations between Lebanese and Syrians, as it does not address the existing negative perceptions between the two groups. This was reflected in Search’s conflict analysis where resentment towards Syrian refugees was often based on the perception that refugees are, for example, stealing jobs and causing housing prices to rise, whereas when asked to point out specific examples, few respondents were able to. This clearly demonstrates that social cohesion cannot be reached by only improving the economic situation, but also through ensuring positive interaction between the two communities in order to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes, to address rumours, and ultimately avoid tensions that can turn into violence.

“I will give the example of Jezzine festival. When the Syrians first came they were not allowed to attend the festival which is held every year in August, but now they are allowed to attend. I even noticed some Lebanese giving their chairs to Syrians, something that was not seen ever before. Additionally, a Syrian going to a Lebanese house for a visit was extraordinary, whereas it is a normal thing nowadays. I go visit my Lebanese friends when they are sick, and I even go to the church when someone passes away to give my condolences. This never happened before due to the tensions.” Hussein, a Syrian member of the Joint Committee in Jezzine, South Lebanon
COMMUNITY DRIVEN AND FLEXIBLE APPROACH

While implementing social cohesion projects, it is of primary importance to tailor the approach to the specific contexts of each of the target communities: there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach.

A thorough preliminary context and conflict assessment should be mandatory prior to any project’s implementation, and equally important is a reflective, flexible and adaptable approach throughout the whole project that will ensure that the project is anchored in the local context. Therefore, the preparation phase is crucial and needs enough time to be dedicated to it. While the overall objective of promoting community-led social cohesion is the same in all the targeted communities, the way to reach this objective might differ from place to place. Implementing both in Tripoli and in South Lebanon, Search’s implementation modalities differed from one community to the other. For example, while most of the municipalities in the South were active and the communities generally had good faith in political institutions and leaders, the municipalities in the North were often absent and less involved in the everyday life of people. This meant that the modes of coordination with local authorities and their involvement in the project were different in each community. In some areas, the local authorities had a positive impact on ensuring the legitimacy of the Joint Committees, while in other communities, local authorities were simply informed about the existence of the Joint Committee and its activities. Nonetheless, efforts to involve municipalities from the beginning of any project is crucial to creating ownership and sustainability, while at the same time one must ensure that power balances are taken into consideration to avoid the potential for hijacking of the project for self-interests.

Where it is more challenging to constructively engage local authorities, the result is fewer constraints on implementing the project, yet also makes it more difficult to ensure local leadership and ownership. To palliate this factor, it is essential to partner with strong community-rooted local organizations and engage key stakeholders from the local community. This showed that committed representatives of the community can act as entry points and successfully ensure support for the project and long-term results. Nonetheless, the project always kept an open invitation for the municipalities to engage in the work in an effort to not undermine their authority. The different levels of engagement and capacities of municipalities also proved the need to empower local authorities to ensure sustainability of social cohesion efforts.

On-going reflection during the project’s implementation demands that all relevant stakeholders are brought on board, including the community, the implementing partners and the donors in a joint effort to maximise the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of social cohesion efforts. It should be a pre-requisite to ensure that ongoing reflective practices result in the necessary adjustments, flexibility and commitment from all actors.
BUILDING ON EXISTING NETWORKS AND STRUCTURES

During implementation, one of the challenges is to ensure participants’ engagement and commitment in the long run, especially from the host communities who often see less added-value in their participation. It is important to acknowledge that host communities might not be ready to engage with refugees at first, as they project most of their issues on the refugees who, on the contrary, are far more eager to build relationships and change the perceptions towards them.

To cope with this fact, the project built on existing Lebanese structures wherever it was possible and worked towards linking Syrian representatives to those structures. Moreover, to ensure the sustainability of the Joint Committees and their work, it was crucial to link the committees to the relevant actors within the communities (from local authorities, civil society or education structures), as well as empowering the Lebanese and Syrian participants to represent and express the needs of the community at large and act as entry points for aid organisations and other service providers.

One successful example is the garbage collection and recycling initiative designed by the Joint Committee of Sarafand in South Lebanon. Sarafand has seen its population increase by 30% since the beginning of the Syrian crisis and thus the production of garbage has increased proportionally. Therefore, managing garbage collection, disposal and recycling became a primary need in the community that was identified by the Joint Committee and also identified as a source tension between the refugees and the host community. In partnership with a local environmental organisation, the committee designed and implemented an initiative tailored to that need, with the secondary aim of becoming self-sustainable by selling the collected garbage to companies. The Syrian participants noted how their active role in the discussion and implementation of the initiative increased their sense of integration in the town. After more than a year working together, the members of the committee developed trusting relationships that went beyond the project’s activities:

“The rules obliged us to have a sponsor to have a residency in Lebanon, I asked Salim because he was with me in the Committee and he was like a brother to me. I also was capable of registering my children in the school due to the sponsorship, because unsponsored children can’t be registered at schools. My children were more accepted after the sponsorship and they were really happy to be back to school.” Manhal, a Syrian member of the Joint Committee in Sarafand, South Lebanon

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8 Learn more about the initiative: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ir6n63WZt4A&nohtml5=False
CAPACITY BUILDING AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Along with the dialogue process and the design and implementation of joint initiatives, the participants went through a series of nonviolent communication (NVC) trainings that enabled them to actively and constructively engage with each other. They learned how to analyse their reactions to conflicts, to identify and communicate their needs and other’s needs, and how to cooperatively solve disputes in a constructive way. Enabling participants to respond to conflicts in a non-adversarial manner is crucial to ensuring positive engagement of participants and empowering them to mitigate further tensions.

In the long-term, NVC trainings enabled the Joint Committees to act as a point of reference between Lebanese and Syrian communities and to solve critical issues:

“When I was in the last training with Search, I got a phone call that there was a decision to remove the Syrian settlement where I live in, so directly I went there to follow upon what is happening and as a result of the training I had good communication skills so I communicated with the main parties. I followed a strategy of the Non-Violent Communication training to let them know that our needs were for shelter, safety, security, stability and they shared the needs of the surrounding community for safety and security. The day after, the decision was cancelled.” Areef, a Syrian Joint Committee member from Burj el-Shamaly, South Lebanon
The NVC trainings were praised by the participants as being highly useful in their everyday life and as an important component of such a project. They felt equipped with the necessary tools in order to interact constructively with each other and to solve intra- and inter-community conflicts.

Additional trainings on how to design and carry out initiatives, on fundraising, communication and outreach skills, sustaining contact with local authorities and organisations, planning and logistics would also further strengthen this approach. These are skills that will enable participants to carry out the work of the Joint Committees and to keep up the activities even after the project ends.

Specifically, an integrated outreach and visibility strategy that takes into consideration each community’s specificities is crucial to ensure greater impact, as promoting positive examples of collaboration and engaging more community members allows them to start changing perceptions and attitudes at a larger scale. As part of the strategy, the project’s participants should be empowered to continue collaborating and engaging with one another beyond the project’s activities and timeframe as they become positive agents of change in their communities.

**CONCLUSION**

To create local response mechanisms to high numbers and protracted influx of refugees and the tensions following between them and their host communities, a multidimensional and flexible approach is needed.

Working towards social cohesion between host communities and refugees first and foremost requires opportunities for positive interaction between the two groups. Interactions should be arranged around activities/initiatives that are informed by the specific local context and address the local needs. Thus a successful project aimed at strengthening social cohesion should be informed by a holistic approach, i.e. incorporating humanitarian, developmental and peacebuilding considerations.

Second, projects should be community driven and incorporate a flexible approach enabling the project to adjust to the specific contexts.

Third, projects should build on existing networks in host communities to ensure motivated participants are involved while at the same time linking refugees to the local community. Lastly, projects should include capacity building activities among its participants in order to empower participants to autonomously continue their work on social cohesion and to promote positive interactions in the long-term.

By focusing equally on host communities and refugees, this ensures the projects’ inclusive approach will help build positive relationships between refugees and local communities in order to minimize tensions and create more resilient and tolerant societies.