

## **Bridging the Gap between Social Protection and a Humanitarian Response: Lebanon's Refugees amid Host Community Fatigue, COVID-19 and Good Practices**

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### **Background**

Over the last decade, Lebanon has been navigating a protracted Syrian refugee crisis and, more recently, a severe political, economic and financial crisis exacerbated by the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic and the explosion at Beirut port in August 2020.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this layered and intersectional crisis, the social, health and food needs of both the refugee and vulnerable local populations have become exceedingly acute.<sup>2</sup>

The ongoing crisis in Lebanon involves political stagnation in the area of government formation, the devaluation of its currency's value by over 90 per cent, and the state's inability to provide electricity, fuel and internet services to the citizens. The government has also done a poor job of managing the COVID-19 pandemic. The explosion in the country's capital on 4 August 2020 left more than 200 dead and thousands more injured and cost the country millions of USD in damages (apart from the long-term repercussions on the country's economy and political stability).<sup>3</sup>

According to the World Bank, 55 per cent of Lebanon's total population, including more than 1.5 million refugees (between Syrians and Palestinians), currently lives below the poverty line, with close to 25 per cent living in extreme poverty (World Bank 2021). Despite the fact that the country intercepted a mass influx of refugees as a result of the Syrian conflict, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) largely found that the Lebanese government persistently affirmed commitments to key protection principles and standards, in addition to upholding the non-refoulement principle – though there were varying degrees of political and popular support for this (UNHCR 2013). The presence of refugees in Lebanon (Palestinians earlier on and Syrians more recently) has profoundly impacted the country's infrastructure, political stability, and economic realities. This impact continues to be put to the

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test even further, as the country continues to endure the ‘worst economic crisis it has faced since the Civil War’ and the exacerbation in COVID-19 cases in the post-Beirut blast era.<sup>4</sup>

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Lebanon has allowed hundreds of thousands of people access to Lebanese territory, registration with UNHCR (until 2015), documentation and basic services (UNHCR Lebanon 2021). As of 2021, UNHCR reports that Lebanon currently hosts an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees (both registered and unregistered) and remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita in the world (UNHCR 2021b). While Lebanon has been commended for upholding the non-refoulement principle, UNHCR insists that the protracted nature of the refugee situation in a context with ‘limited self-reliance possibilities’ such as Lebanon has led to ‘an exponential rise in extreme poverty among refugees’ (UNHCR 2021c). As a result, an estimated 88 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon currently fall below the extreme poverty line, further corroding the resilience of these individuals to avoid harmful and demeaning coping strategies (ibid.). The main challenge in Lebanon has therefore been to address the needs of refugees while simultaneously providing support to the growing numbers of Lebanese pushed into poverty due to the economic crisis the country continues to endure.

Lebanon’s social protection system (SPS) remains ineffective, fragmented, and privatised to a large extent. The International Labour Organization (ILO) goes so far as to describe the country’s SPS as a ‘mosaic of scattered schemes with low coverage and lack of coordination’. Available social services across the country remain ineffective and essentially leave the ‘poorest and most vulnerable’ of the Lebanese population without any systematic support for their livelihoods and basic needs.<sup>5</sup> These inadequacies underscore the urgent need for substantial reform of Lebanon’s SPS – not only to protect the needs of its citizens but also to be able to adapt to the needs of other vulnerable populations hosted on its territory. One of the major consequences of the country’s largely ‘laissez-faire’ approach to governance is a clear absence of social protection mechanisms – a matter that has become increasingly visible since the influx of Syrian refugees in 2011 (Fouad et al. 2020). Moreover, Lebanon’s exclusionary social policies increase the insecurities of those marginalised and subsequently fuel resentments and hostilities with and among the refugee population – a matter often used as a tool to shape political narratives and anti-refugee sentiments for political interests.<sup>6</sup>

Lebanon has repeatedly insisted that it is not a country of asylum but rather a country of ‘transit’.<sup>7</sup> As the country remains insistent on not signing the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees, refugees in the country are obliquely labelled ‘temporarily displaced persons’. An absence of contemporary Lebanese legislation (and vague language) on both the protection and reception of refugee populations serves as a legal ‘loophole’ which largely ‘pardons’ Lebanon from the responsibility and accountability of providing social protection to ‘temporarily displaced populations’ present in the country. In

this context, Syrian refugees are essentially left with either of these two options: (1) self-reliance or (2) reliance on local and international NGOs.

This paper aims to draw out the lessons learned from social protection programmes in Lebanon that aim to link humanitarian and development objectives by exploring how these programmes were adapted amid COVID-19 and post the Beirut blast in refugee settings. It also aims to examine the alignment of humanitarian assistance with national social protection systems and frame this within Lebanon's international obligations (or lack thereof) to its refugee community while shedding light on Lebanon's good practices.

### **Social Protection in Lebanon**

Varying degrees of commitments to Lebanon's SPS have stemmed from: (1) a growing recognition of the country's comparatively weak provision of formal social protection on a large scale; (2) low economic growth and prospects accompanied by wealth and income inequalities; and (3) growing concerns for the well-being and livelihoods of both vulnerable Lebanese and refugees in the context of the Syrian crisis (Nabulsi et al. 2020). According to the World Bank, from a comparative perspective, Lebanon's social assistance, or social safety net (SSN), is characterised by low spending and coverage (ibid.). The already stretched and weak public services have experienced additional pressures from the large influx of Syrian refugees who currently constitute over 25 per cent of the Lebanese population.<sup>8</sup> The intersectional and layered crisis in Lebanon has raised questions about both the adequacy of the SSN in supporting vulnerable Lebanese households and the provision of support to refugees. Recent developments in social assistance schemes and humanitarian aid provision have also triggered discussions about potential opportunities to enhance coordination and alignment across humanitarian and social protection efforts to cater to both national and migrant vulnerable communities.<sup>9</sup>

Lebanon's economic and social model has historically been rooted in minimum state intervention, justified in part by the objective of guaranteeing a multi-confessional and open society.<sup>10</sup> This approach, together with the intersectional, protracted and layered conflicts Lebanon continues to experience amid interruptions in public services provision, has contributed to increased dependence on both private sector and community actors in providing services, including social protection. The key distinguishing features of social protection in Lebanon that hinder bridging of the aforementioned gap (between social protection and humanitarian aid) include: (1) high involvement and reliance on the private sector, NGOs, CSOs, CBOs and FBOs<sup>11</sup>; (2) high involvement of the private sector in health and education, and low social spending in both sectors for poorer and vulnerable groups; (3) low social insurance coverage of workers; and (4) limited social assistance in the form of in-kind transfers and cash transfers.<sup>12</sup>

## **Lebanon's Social Protection Model and Refugees amid COVID-19 and Other Crises**

Millions of residents in Lebanon continue to be at heightened risk of going hungry due to lockdown measures related to COVID-19 and the country's protracted economic crisis unless the government urgently puts a coordinated, comprehensive and inclusive assistance plan in place (Key Informant Interview, UNHCR, May 2021).<sup>13</sup> For Lebanon's residents, both citizens and refugees, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already devastating economic crisis and exposed the blatant inadequacies and gaps of Lebanon's SPS.<sup>14</sup> Lebanon provides a handful of formal programmes to support households living below the poverty line. Its Emergency National Poverty Targeting Program remains 'poorly targeted' and incapable of reaching those most in need.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, very few efforts have been made at the national level to tangibly assess poverty rates among Lebanese and non-Lebanese residents in the country on a regular basis.<sup>16</sup>

In Lebanon, official social protection policies (SPPs) remain at a 'nascent stage' (Kukrety 2016). Like much of the country's policies, the majority of its SPPs were developed on an ad hoc basis and are rooted in reactionary responses to crises and emergency situations (ibid.). According to an expert from Lebanon's Ministry of Labour, they do not reflect or outline a sustainable long-term vision or strategy, nor do they reflect a systematic and sustainable implementation (Key Informant Interview, Lebanese Ministry of Labour, May 2021).<sup>17</sup> This context has laid the foundation for enhancing the roles of private charities, local FBOs, NGOs and INGOs in the provision of welfare and social security to the country's most vulnerable groups (Lebanese and non-Lebanese).<sup>18</sup> On the administrative level, Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) leads the coordination of social protection, including the contracting of CSO, CBO and NGO partners (Abdo 2014). Social Development Centres are present in various regions of the country and are tasked with implementing MoSA's policies on the ground. In some of the country's governorates, these Centres are tasked with extending their health and education services to Syrian refugees. Unprepared and under-equipped for the challenges resulting from the mass influx of Syrian refugees, these Centres have become increasingly strained, and consequently, overwhelmed and ineffective for many vulnerable groups (ibid.).

The two main public social protection programmes in Lebanon remain: (1) the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and (2) the Emergency National Poverty Targeting Program (ENPTP) (ibid.). Catering to employees, employers and government bodies, the NSSF is the largest independent public institution for social insurance in Lebanon (Civil Society Knowledge Center 2020). It is administered by the Ministry of Labour and its Council of Ministers. The NSSF covers: (1) sickness and maternity security, (2) emergency work and occupational diseases guarantee, (3) family and educational benefits, and (4) end-of-service provisions (ibid.). Formal employers in Lebanon are obliged to register their employees with the NSSF.

Nonetheless, there are no enforcement mechanisms to ensure the registration of employees. According to a report published by International Alert, 40 per cent of the employees in the private sector remain unregistered, and a large portion of these employees benefit from personal private insurance packages (Mufti 2018). Moreover, the fact that more than 30 per cent of the overall formal workforce in Lebanon is self-employed highlights the NSSF's very limited scope of coverage (ibid.).

Despite the fact that the registration in the country's NSSF does not necessarily 'legally' depend on the residency or citizenship status of the individual, it applies strictly to the 'legal' labour force (ibid.). But the reality is that the overwhelming majority of Lebanese who live below the poverty line, as well as Syrian refugees, are by default ineligible because they predominantly pursue various forms of informal and daily labour (ILO 2015). Registration rates of Syrian migrant workers prior to the escalation of the Syrian conflict in 2011 were very low; in the face of the current workforce surplus, with the influx of more than one million Syrian refugees into the country, the registration for social protection by the NSSF has become even more unreachable for the Syrian workforce in Lebanon (Baroud and Zeidan 2020). Though Palestinian refugees from Lebanon (PRL) have been granted access to the end-of-service provisions of the NSSF in 2010, they remain outside the remaining services of the fund. The extension of these provisions to Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) remains increasingly implausible at this stage in the country's economic and political history (ibid.).

Targeting the 'extremely poor' Lebanese households, Lebanon's Council of Ministers launched the Emergency National Poverty Targeting Program (ENPTP) in 2014 in cooperation with UNHCR, with funding provided by the World Bank (to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis) (World Bank 2014). The ENPTP, in essence, is aimed at providing support to those excluded from eligibility for the NSSF and is consequently designed to offer: (1) support with medical and health bills, (2) school tuition waivers and reductions, (3) free books and (4) food assistance (ibid.). In order to be eligible to benefit from the programme, households are required to approach one of the Ministry of Social Affairs' Social Development Centres and undergo various levels of assessment prior to being granted any form of assistance under the programme (Daleel Madani 2021). Even though it aims to assist some of the country's most vulnerable, enrolment in the programme relies heavily on self-initiative, having the resources to move around the country, prior knowledge of the programme itself amid connectivity and communication barriers, as well as the possession of a number of documents as a prerequisite (ibid.). While the Lebanese government has attempted to close the gaps in social protection through the development of this programme, several reports have highlighted that the selection procedures remain inconsistent and that restrictive eligibility indicators remain incapable of catering to developing realities – particularly the country's ongoing economic, political and humanitarian crises (WFP 2021).

## **The Role of External Actors in Social Service Provision for Lebanon's Most Vulnerable**

As a direct result of the Lebanese government's failure to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, as well as of the denial of refugee status to Syrians, Lebanon remains without any legal obligation to afford them any form of social protection and, thereby, continues to hinder Syrian refugees' adequate access to justice and livelihood opportunities (Janmyr 2017). The dramatic gap in the provision of public social protection for refugees by the state is filled by the activism of a wide range of international humanitarian organisations to a large extent; the most relevant among them remain UN agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR; for Syrians), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA; for Palestinians), UN Women and the World Food Programme (WFP) among others (ibid.).

In order to provide minimally acceptable standards of basic assistance, UNHCR has institutionalised its protection and humanitarian aid provision mechanisms in evolving and tumultuous agreements with the Lebanese government amid the country's politically, economically and socially sensitive climate (UNHCR 2015). In Lebanon, the situation of refugees within its borders continues to be officially viewed as a temporary humanitarian crisis, not a protracted refugee crisis – with the government often referring to refugee communities as 'temporarily displaced individuals' (Janmyr 2018). The fragile relationship between the Lebanese government and UNHCR was put to the test in 2015 when the Lebanese government requested that UNHCR halt the registration of Syrians as of May that year.<sup>19</sup> This move denied Syrian refugees not only access to essential social services but also the legal recognition of refugee status and the rights and obligations this identification carries. To navigate this reality within the Lebanese context, institutionalised social service practices by UN agencies and their partners on the ground must operate under the banner of 'humanitarian aid' and not social protection.<sup>20</sup>

In Lebanon, 40 per cent of the income of refugee households consists of humanitarian assistance from UN agencies and their partners.<sup>21</sup> Different modalities of income include everything from in-kind to cash-based assistance (UNHCR 2021a). In fact, UNHCR's cash assistance programme in Lebanon is its largest in the world (ibid.). However, the ongoing and protracted nature of the Syrian crisis, the sharp decrease in donor capabilities for funding, and the rise in living costs at the national level have made outlining and framing, and thereby addressing, the livelihood concerns for refugees in Lebanon largely unpredictable.

Both refugees and vulnerable Lebanese populations living close to or below the poverty line remain substantively reliant on various entities in the private sector for the provision of social services and protection. In addition to the aforementioned UN agencies and international humanitarian organisations, local CBOs and FBOs continue to play a vital role in providing welfare to multiple factions of the population (Haddad 2020). Some more wide-ranging

actors, with different degrees of institutionalisation, provide social services and protection across the country. In situations of response to short-term crises, such as the Beirut blast, government entities and international humanitarian organisations have worked closely with local charities, CBOs, FBOs and various charitable and aid wings of Lebanese political parties.<sup>22</sup> Further, due to the fact that the Lebanese political scene is heavily rooted in clientelist practices, providing social services or social protection and partisan activism have been traditionally used as tools to maintain and stabilise political constituencies and exercise internal soft power (Cammatt 2011). While Lebanon has opened the doors for international humanitarian organisations to aid refugee communities across the country, multiple reports highlight that this resulted in poor Lebanese citizens increasingly feeling neglected by non-state humanitarian actors who appear to extend all their focus and resources towards refugees instead (ibid.).

In March 2021, via the Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the European Union adopted a EUR 130 million assistance package to support Syrian refugees and local communities in Jordan and Lebanon in key areas such as social protection, healthcare services, and waste management.<sup>23</sup> This package was adopted by the Operational Board of the Trust Fund, which brings together the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the EU Member States, and representatives of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, the Syria Recovery Trust Fund and the World Bank. In the case of Lebanon specifically, this amount also aims to alleviate the consequences of the Beirut port blast, which affected ‘both Syrian refugees and the Lebanese people’. With Lebanon receiving EUR 98 million of this support package, an overall EUR 45 million will be directed towards social protection and assistance. The breakdown envisaged for the fund is as follows : (1) EUR 25 million for the continued support of the most vulnerable in Lebanon; (2) EUR 20 million to support a comprehensive national social protection system; (3) EUR 20 million to enhance access to healthcare services and vaccinations, including for COVID-19; (4) EUR 29 million directed towards essential water services; and (5) EUR 10 million directed towards non-formal education.

### **Coping Mechanisms: Cash-based Interventions**

There have been significant innovations in social assistance interventions across the country in the areas of approaches, tools and systems in the context of the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis; these have been put forward by various stakeholders such as UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), local NGOs, FBOs and grassroots organisations in collaboration with various governmental departments (Idris 2019). Most effective was the use of cash-based interventions coupled with vulnerability and targeting methodologies, which assisted in closing multiple gaps in the provision of social protection. Cash-based interventions have made a considerable difference in promoting resilience among vulnerable groups, developing a solid foundation to promote more long-term, inclusive and sustainable social protection for everyone residing on Lebanese territory (ibid.).

## Bridging the Gap between Social Protection and a Humanitarian Response

In May 2012, Lebanon requested that the WFP begin delivering food assistance to Syrian refugees using paper vouchers; this was later scaled up and the transfer modality shifted to an electronic card (WFP 2020a). The system enabled targeted beneficiaries to purchase food commodities at WFP-contracted shops throughout the country. In November 2020, WFP assisted a total of 1,094,677 beneficiaries through cash-based transfer modalities amounting to USD 33.8 million and through the distribution of family food parcels as part of the COVID-19 and economic crisis response. Of those assisted, 807,668 were Syrian refugees and 21,088 refugees of other nationalities (WFP 2020b).

In most countries, national social safety nets are not accessible to non-nationals, and governments rarely have the capacity, tools, and processes in place to adapt to the impacts of mass displacement shocks. Lebanon's good practices in this regard are evidence that this model can be replicated in similar settings regardless of the difficulties in data analysis, accountability and coordination across multiple safety nets, numerous ministries and the differences in funding of humanitarian and government safety nets in terms of duration, political requirements, objectives and conditions. The subsequent sections of this paper intend to delve into the good practices put in place to promote the social protection of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, addressing the matter through added layers of economic hardship, COVID-19 and the Beirut blast to explore adaptability and innovation in these areas.

### **Lebanon's Good Practices in the Absence of Social Protection Frameworks**

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis, Lebanon's government has repeatedly affirmed commitments to key protection principles and standards (such as the non-refoulement principle) despite the country's increasingly weakened infrastructure and capabilities (Tabar 2016). From the beginning of the crisis in 2011, and throughout the peak of displacement between 2013 and 2014 when thousands of people were arriving in Lebanon every day in search of international protection, Lebanon saved millions of people fleeing conflict by allowing them access to Lebanese territory, registration, documentation, and basic humanitarian aid and services (ibid.). Responsiveness to mass influxes of Syrians in need of protection was not necessarily similar in many parts of the world, which prompted the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants in 2016, where the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was adopted (UNHCR 2016).

With the aim of effectively and comprehensively responding to the humanitarian and development needs of the Syrian refugee community in the country, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) was developed as an integrated approach that coordinates the work of various ministries, UN agencies as well as local and international humanitarian organisations (Government of Lebanon et al. 2021). Lebanon's government has played a pivotal role in coordinating various actors in the humanitarian and intervention spaces through relevant ministries and government bodies – particularly, its Ministry of Social Affairs. The LCRP is

a multi-year plan bringing together close to 200 partners to deliver protection and provide basic services and immediate relief assistance to 2.8 million people including: (1) Syrian refugees, (2) vulnerable Lebanese and (3) Palestinian refugees. The LCRP additionally outlines the critical areas for strengthening national systems across Lebanon's infrastructure, economy and public institutions (ibid.). At the local level, municipalities have played an important role in making local infrastructure and services available to Syrian refugees – particularly those dispersed throughout remote and hard-to-reach regions of the country (Zapater 2017).

The increased pressure on these already scarce resources throughout the country has led to a critical need for support to the municipal services and institutions and the affected Lebanese host communities to mitigate the impact and contribute to the longer-term development of municipal services. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict more than a decade ago, UNHCR has allocated USD 226.8 million in both institutional and community support projects, including support to Lebanon's ministries, municipalities, the educational and livelihood sectors, and infrastructure (UNHCR 2019). Between 2018 and 2019, upward of USD 240 million was channelled by the LCRP's partners to: (1) strengthen service delivery, (2) policy development, (3) capacity building and (4) institutional stability in the public sector. That same year, an additional USD 26 million was invested in supporting municipalities and unions to respond to prevailing pressure on services (ibid.).

### ***The Non-refoulement Principle***

As previously mentioned, Lebanon's first expression of good practice has been its ongoing commitment to the non-refoulement principle (UNHCR 2019). Beyond upholding this principle, the country has additionally been offering (though through a complex procedure that requires re-examination), civil registration to Syrian refugees since the beginning of the crisis (UNHCR 2018). As reported by UNHCR, by October 2019, approximately 188,000 children were born in Lebanon to Syrian refugee parents and registered with the UN agency accordingly. To recognise the right of every child to be registered at birth to prevent statelessness, as well as in the importance of being able to demonstrate Syrian parentage for repatriation at a later stage, Lebanon has initiated a series of policies and decisions to facilitate both birth and marriage registration for refugee children and parents (ibid.). According to an interview conducted with an expert from the country's Ministry of Displaced Affairs, 'significant progress' was made between 2017 and 2019 to increase registration rates (Key Informant, Ministry of Displaced Affairs, June 2021).<sup>24</sup> The informant insisted that the Ministry will continue to work diligently amid ongoing economic and political turmoil to ensure that the 'same progress' is witnessed in 2020 to 'reduce the number of unregistered children in Lebanon and reduce statelessness' (Key Informant, Ministry of Displaced Affairs, June 2021).<sup>25</sup>

### *Education*

Lebanon's good practices in its educational sector are notable. The country's public school system, under the direction of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), has traditionally (to varying degrees) welcomed non-Lebanese children and enabled them to pursue accredited education in line with the national curriculum; in early 2014, MEHE began an afternoon shift of classes explicitly targeted at refugee children (Arche Nova 2021). To accommodate the increasing demand on public schools, MEHE additionally developed the 'Reaching All Children with Education (RACE)' plan between 2014 and 2016 with the support of the international community (World Bank 2016). This was followed by RACE II (between 2017 and 2021) which encompassed a more strategic approach to the education response and incorporated child protection, quality education, vocational training and life skills into the strategy. Implementation of RACE II was supported by nationwide campaigns aimed at mobilising vulnerable communities and bringing as many school-age children back to the formal schooling system as possible. Following these initiatives, non-Lebanese students increased from 30,000 in the academic year 2012–13 to over 210,000 in 2018–19. In order to ensure access to education for refugee children and youth, MEHE waived residency permits for refugees as a requirement to enrol in primary, secondary and tertiary education (ibid.).

### *Health*

Health care is highly privatised in Lebanon and lies at the centre of intersectional and layered political and economic systems tainted by mismanagement and corruption to a large extent.<sup>26</sup> Despite this reality, Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has worked diligently to ensure that Syrian refugees are able to receive the medical care they need through its partnership with UNHCR (UNHCR 2021d). Since the onset of the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, MoPH, with support from UNHCR and other international partners, ensured that all individuals and families in the refugee community had access to medical consultations, testing and essential medication at affordable costs through a network of dispensaries around the country. Since 2013, Lebanon's MoPH has additionally supported the provision of vaccines at UNHCR reception centres and made them available free of charge for children across the MoPH network of primary healthcare centres (though this is not the case for the COVID-19 vaccine yet, according to multiple reports) (ibid.). When it comes to accessing hospitalisation, Syrian refugees are admitted into private and public hospitals at rates determined by MoPH (MoPH 2016). Life-saving and emergency surgeries are, to a large extent, funded by UNHCR. The MoPH issued several binding memorandums to all primary healthcare networks requesting them not to differentiate between Lebanese and non-Lebanese patients regarding the provision of services and collection of fees. The Ministry also leads frequent coordination meetings with all health partners involved in response efforts.

### ***Social Services***

Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) remains the country's main government body for ensuring the adequate and comprehensive provision of social services. MoSA is tasked with: (1) ensuring and upholding child protection, (2) preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence, (3) providing family support services, (4) providing tailored services to individuals with physical or mental disabilities, and (5) providing social services to vulnerable families (including Syrian refugees) through its network of over 200 Social Development Centres (SDCs) dispersed across the country (OCHA Services 2021). SDCs are open to Lebanese citizens and foreigners without discrimination, including refugees and migrants of all nationalities. The SDCs' activities comprise: (1) basic literacy classes, (2) vocational training, (3) protection information sessions, (4) awareness-raising and (5) other services such as child care.

In the areas of access to justice, though in need of significant improvement and coordination with various government entities and stakeholders, Lebanon's Ministry of Justice (MoJ) continues to lend a 'special focus' to women and children at risk – particularly those from refugee communities (Key Informant Interview, UNICEF/MoSA, May 2021).<sup>27</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

Nationwide protests that broke out across the country in October 2019, and extended well into 2020, were rooted in demands for improved livelihood opportunities, social protection, justice and accountability (Amnesty International 2020). These demands not only reflected the grievances of refugees and marginalised groups; they essentially echoed the central demands of the majority of Lebanon's population. Aspirations for immediate reform and policy action have largely been halted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the country's worsening economic crisis, as well as the explosion at the Beirut port – an incident that once again moved the country in the direction of seeking short-term humanitarian solutions rather than long-term durable developmental and rights-based reforms. Recommendations for long-term institutional reforms following protestors' and activists' demands include: (1) the development of social assistance programmes that comprehensively encompass livelihood opportunities, labour market activation, health provision, education and social welfare (including alignment with existing safety nets for refugees); (2) scaling up investments in social safety net infrastructure such as social registries, systems for identification and communication of complaints, while ensuring that targeting mechanisms are evidence-based, transparent, and gender and disability sensitive; and (3) ensuring that transparency and anti-corruption measures – such as monitoring and evaluation processes and technical audit – are put in place (*ibid.*).

Lebanon's social protection system presents significant inadequacies and barriers to access, leaving vulnerable Lebanese populations, and Syrian refugees, without basic social security and protection. Despite the country's ongoing good practices, these inadequacies coupled with host community fatigue and public narratives focusing on the oversaturation of the labour market and social services remain at the centre of social protection debates.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it is pivotal for public narratives to shift towards highlighting the fact that the socio-economic situation of vulnerable populations in Lebanon is primarily impacted by the mismanagement of relevant Lebanese ministries, rather than by the presence of refugees and the 'burden' they pose to the country's infrastructure and resources. The lack of accountability in the provision of public goods by the Lebanese government (reflected in narrow social protection policies) existed prior to the Syrian refugee crisis and it will continue long after the Syrian refugee crisis subsides if the necessary reforms do not take place at the public administrative levels.

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### Notes

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