



# Syrian refugees in Lebanon: Limited livelihoods and untold challenges

## Summary

This study uses information and survey data collected from refugee households, refugee workers' bosses, camp leaders and local and international humanitarian organizations in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. A sustainable livelihoods framework is applied to understanding the livelihoods of refugee families and the challenges they face. This is done by analyzing refugee households' access to physical, natural, human, social and financial assets; their income and livelihood sources; and livelihood outcomes on food security, shelter, education and health.

Syrian refugees have found security from the ravaging conflict in Syria in the Bekaa Valley. However, in spite of commendable efforts from the host country and the UN, as well as other international and local humanitarian organizations, the support provided has failed to meet the humanitarian standards set by those organizations. Nevertheless, the support varies greatly in terms of the coverage provided in response to actual needs (14 to 100 percent), the proportion of beneficiaries in relation to the total refugee population (16 to 80 percent) and the duration for which it is provided

(much support is only provided for a few months). However, the most important refugee income source is seasonal credit from local businesses, which 95 percent rely on. Agriculture is a main source of income for about 90 percent of refugee households, providing 22 percent of total income. Non-agricultural employment provides 21 percent of total income, although fewer households have access to the latter. The majority of all workers (61 percent) are male, while females account for 39 percent. Non-agricultural work is male-dominated (96 percent male), while agricultural work is more of a female-led activity (53 percent female vs 47 percent male). Humanitarian aid—which is both in-kind supplies and in cash for a great majority of refugee households (89 percent)—is the most important income source (49 percent).

Only 4 percent of people in the sample had legal documentation, affecting their ability to obtain work permits and hence their working conditions, resulting in a lack of contracts, lack of workers' rights and inability to complain, bad treatment by employers in the work place, fluctuation and seasonality of work, lack of safety practices, short duration of work, low wages for the kind of work carried out and delayed payments. There is also a clear gender gap in wages among

Syrian refugees; overall, women make up the majority of low wage earners. In this survey, 22 percent of workers are children, 59 percent are female and 41 percent male. Sixty-nine percent of the refugees are severely food insecure, while 9 percent are extremely food insecure and need emergency intervention. Refugee shelter comprises mainly tents built on private land, where landlords are paid a monthly rent. There is a general lack of healthcare in the refugee camps. In this study, 74 percent of school-age children were not attending school, while 26 percent were attending informal school. Only 4 percent were attending formal school.

## Highlights

- Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not recognized in Lebanese law as refugees but are considered as guests. This means that refugees do not have legal residence in Lebanon and the process of getting legal temporary residence is very difficult. The lack of legal residence, or internationally accepted refugee status, puts refugees in a legal limbo, which means they are open to all kinds of safety risks; they do not feel safe, and they are in constant fear of being forced to leave the camps or leave Lebanon at any time. This situation also constrains refugees from participating in the formal labor market. The informal labor market is susceptible to different kinds of abuses. Since 2015, Syrians have been required to sign a pledge not to work, which has recently changed to a pledge to abide by Lebanese law, which effectively means the same, since the law does not provide work permits for Syrian refugees. Employment of Syrians is now mostly restricted to construction, agriculture and cleaning services, but getting a work permit is difficult. Women have no access to non-farm work for local cultural reasons.
- Refugees' livelihoods are heavily dependent on humanitarian aid, as well as earnings from seasonal employment in the farm sector and, to a lesser extent, the non-farm sector. Access to the non-farm sector is, however, limited by the lack of legal residence. Agricultural work is not regulated and has problems with respect to long hours, low wages and irregular payment schedules. The power imbalance between farm workers (mostly women and children) and labor bosses or landowners leads to potential denial of farm workers' rights.
- Child labor, particularly in the agricultural sector, is very widespread; nearly one third of the agricultural labor in Bekaa Valley comprises school-age children between 8 and 14 years, with the majority of these being girls. Among school age children between 6 and 14 years, only one-third attended school; the rest were out of school with the main reasons being to work in order to support their family, lack of facilities, and difference in curricula.
- Overall, refugee households in the Bekaa Valley live below the poverty

line. About 93 percent of households live below the poverty line of US\$4 a day per person. The food security situation is subject to seasonality. In summer, food security is not as much of a problem as in winter, mainly due to the greater availability of agricultural and non-agricultural income sources in the summer. Refugees also suffer from a lack of sanitation and access to health.

## Potential Intervention

Drawing on these findings and value chain study, we argue that the most effective approach is to find ways of enabling Syrian refugees to access agricultural assets: land and livestock. The following interventions are proposed for Syrian refugees in Beqaa Valley:

- **Access to rental land** Access to land offers the most important opportunity to ensure refugees' food security. This can be achieved by renting land. However, refugees cannot do this without third party support. Renting land depends on trust and Syrians who have long-term connections with the Lebanese community are renting land. This practice can be extended to more refugee families through the support of civil society organizations. Civil society organizations can rent land on behalf of Syrian refugees and allocate that for food production by refugee families and for income generation. To ensure that the impact of the scheme is spread widely across refugees, a

group of Syrian refugee families would be assigned to cultivate 1–5 dunums (1 dunum=0.10 hectare) each, depending on the amount of land rented or initial funds available. These families would cultivate the land with short season vegetable crops of their choice, providing multiple harvests per year. The tenants would repay the rent over time as they harvest the crops. In the second year, a new group of refugee families would be given the chance to cultivate the land. The role of the civil society organization is crucial here to maintain commitments and payment of rent to the landowner and to make sure that the program runs smoothly. The effects of the program on the livelihoods of the refugee family could be easily monitored and measured.

- **Training in GAP** Training in good agricultural practices (GAP) is crucial to enable refugees to maintain good production, reduce costs and achieve a good income from the rented land. Hence, the land rental scheme should be supplemented with intensive training on vegetable production and agronomic management by other Syrians, who are already farming in Beqaa through share-cropping. This training should be organized by research or development organizations with posts in Beqaa, such as the Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute (LARI), Arcenciel, and others.

## ■ **Small ruminant enterprises**

Syrian refugees have good experience in small ruminant rearing as many refugees had small ruminants before they came to Lebanon. Their knowledge of how to raise animals allows them to keep a few animals in the camp. However, this practice is currently informal and faces many problems. The proposed intervention would provide a few goats or ewes (the exact number to be determined based on minimum income to be generated) to each family. The refugee families that receive the animals would be given training in animal husbandry, health and feed management. The families would have a shared shed, and joint herding and grazing to minimize the impact of the animals on the area.

- **Dairy processing** Syrian women have good skills in processing milk and making a variety of products which can be sold locally. A small dairy processing unit with standard tools should be established in Terbol, or in other small towns that have high concentrations of refugees. The aim of this facility would firstly be to provide a training facility to women, and secondly to allow women who are able and willing to bring their own milk and process it under hygienic and safe standards and sell it through their social networks within the refugee camps. If the Lebanese find these workshop products interesting, they can also become a market for the goods. The dairy training workshop should be managed by an international or national organization with capacity and know-how.

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Full working paper: 'Enhancing the livelihoods and food security of Syrian refugees in Lebanon', available from ICARDA MEL: <http://repo.mel.cgiar.org/handle/20.500.11766/10065>

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## **Key words**

Syrian refugees, legal status, food security, education, agricultural and non-agricultural work, child labor, aid, health, Lebanon.