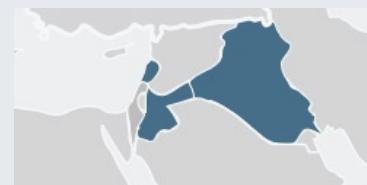


MASHREQ REGION: CAPABILITIES MEASURING CHANGES IN SOCIOECONOMIC WELFARE SINCE COVID-19 IN FORCIBLY DISPLACED POPULATIONS, AND HOST COMMUNITIES

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns and economic shocks had an enormous impact on refugee-hosting countries in the Mashreq region—Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. During the pandemic, these countries faced challenging circumstances, such as declining lower oil revenues in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the Port of Beirut explosion in Lebanon, and political instability in Iraq and Lebanon.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

The objectives of this project were to:

- (a) assess the impact of the pandemic on the socio-economic welfare of Syrian refugees and host communities in the Mashreq region, in order to inform the COVID-19 responses of host governments and international agencies; and
- (b) lay the foundation for long-term, in-depth collaboration between the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) regional and country offices in the Mashreq region and the World Bank Middle East and North Africa Poverty and Equity Global Practice.

JDC funding of \$50,000, combined with \$25,000 from the World Bank supported:

- (1) the preparation of welfare analytics for host countries;
- (2) the production of a report assessing the welfare impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent economic shocks on refugees and host communities; and
- (3) a joint UNHCR-World Bank launch event to disseminate findings.

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

JDC funding helped to achieve several results and outcomes, including:

- **Analysis that brought together siloed data sources from UNHCR and the World Bank.** A small investment from JDC leveraged much larger earlier investments by unlocking several datasets that had only been available to the staff in each organization.¹
- **Emerging findings from the analytical work created opportunities for UNHCR's to engage with government and international agencies, before the report was published.** In the lead up to the publication of the report, UNHCR organized technical consultations in each country (Lebanon, Jordan, KRI), with participants from host governments and interagency fora to discuss emerging findings and their implications for policy and programming. The timing of these consultations, in September 2020, was helpful to host governments, UNHCR and other international agencies, which were about to begin their planning for 2021 programs (a process that usually begins in October). In this way, even before the report was published, the findings were referenced and reflected in country plans, including the government's response to the crisis.

¹ These included the World Bank's Syrian Refugees and Host Communities Survey (SRHCS) and three surveys from UNHCR: the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) from Jordan; the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) from Lebanon; and the Vulnerability Assessment Tool from the Kurdistan Region or Iraq (KRI).

- **Presentation of the methodology and initial findings at the fourth Brussels Conference on “Supporting the future of Syria and the region” in June 2020.** The virtual conference brought together donors and refugee hosting countries, international organizations, the European Union and United Nations agencies. The World Bank delivered two presentations on the margins of the conference. One, “*The fallout of war: the regional consequences of the conflict in Syria*” (a separate analytical piece) and another “*Changes in socio-economic outcomes since COVID-19 for Syrian refugees and host communities: a discussion of methodologies and initial results*”, were well received by attendees.
- **Publication of the [*Compounding Misfortunes*](#) report in December 2020.** The report predicts initial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on poverty levels among Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan, Lebanon and KRI. The analysis estimated that 4.4 million people in host communities, close to 1 million Syrian refugees, and 180,000 internally displaced Iraqis in KRI were driven into poverty during 2020. The analysis and preparation of the report was completed in a very short timeframe following the onset of the pandemic.
- **Credible evidence in the report helped UNHCR to advocate for additional funding for refugees and host communities.** The report contributed to the evidence of the disproportionate impact that the global pandemic has had on refugees and host communities compared to the general population. The World Bank’s rigorous methodology and robust analysis of each country provided credible evidence and an objective frame for policy discussions in interagency fora. In doing so, it gave weight to UNHCR’s advocacy efforts on these challenges. In particular, the report signalled that high levels of inflation in Lebanon necessitated significant upscaling of cash assistance to mitigate the effects of the compounded crises, which guided some of the discussions in the cash working groups. Senior government officials, particularly from KRI and Lebanon, used the platform provided by the panel discussions to raise the visibility of their challenges in an international forum. Also, representatives of donor governments such as Germany, who participated in technical presentations of the report, helped to amplify the findings in their own countries.
- **Exemplary and productive collaboration during the project between World Bank and UNHCR staff.** The World Bank and UNHCR Task Team Leaders quickly built trust and a warm working relationship. There was a shared understanding of their respective roles, which capitalized on the capabilities and expertise of the different teams. The World Bank MENA Poverty and Equity Global Practice undertook the lion’s share of the analytical work and presentation of findings, while the UNHCR MENA team facilitated access to UNHCR data and handled the publication and dissemination of the report.
- **The strong working relationships established during this project led to further collaboration between the World Bank and UNHCR, while also serving as a model for other agencies.** Positive interaction between the World Bank and UNHCR led to further discussion about other potential areas for collaboration, and this has led to several new joint initiatives. For example, in Lebanon, the World Bank, UNHCR and the UN World Food Program are now collaborating on the Lebanon Vulnerability Assessment Panel (LVAP) data collection work - a direct consequence of the *Compounding Misfortunes* report. Furthermore, as a result of the productive interagency working relationship facilitated by the JDC, the UNHCR and World Bank teams are conducting a socio-economic survey of refugee and mixed movements in Libya. This project also provided a model for similar work with other international agencies such as a project managed by the World Bank MENA Poverty and Equity Global Practice and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).
- **The partnership between UNHCR and the World Bank is increasingly ‘institutionalized’.** Gradually, more people from different parts of UNHCR have become involved in this and other joint projects, establishing several contacts and collaborations that are not dependent on one person or one relationship.

CHALLENGES

While UNHCR has used the report in its dialogue with host governments and international agencies responding to the pandemic, the Bank's role, following the publication of the report, was limited. The limited engagement from the Bank to engage in policy dialogue about the findings was a result of the limited budget that was available for the project—reaching out to government counterparts would have created additional work for World Bank staff that was not funded.

It is difficult to attribute shifts in policy to this one small project. There are many other, much larger activities undertaken by the Bank and others that shape policy in more substantial ways. Moreover, while there has been an exponential increase in research on forced displacement in recent years, it is still an underdeveloped field, and much more research needs to be done to come to consensus, especially on policy responses.

LESSONS LEARNED AND JDC'S ROLE

While the initial scoping note refers to data sharing protocols, the team found that a data sharing agreement was not necessary for the type of data that was being shared. For this phase of the project, the data that UNHCR shared with the World Bank was already anonymized and aggregated, so safeguards were already in place to protect personal information. Additionally, UNHCR was sharing data with the World Bank for the purposes of a joint project undertaken in close collaboration, with a high degree of trust, and in pursuit of a common objective. This was quite a different “use case” from an external request to UNHCR to release data.

The UNHCR and World Bank teams discussed the possibility of developing a tool that could be used to guide discussions in interagency working groups. This was not pursued for two reasons. Partly due to a lack of interest from host governments, and also as it would have required more funding to simplify the tool and conduct training. More importantly, the teams recognized that, rather than pursuing ongoing engagement with interagency working groups in each country, there was value in one-off, ‘just-in-time’ analyses that can provide credible evidence that informs discussion and creates an understanding of shared issues.

Therefore, it is recommended that the JDC continue to fund one-off, just-in-time projects that respond to sudden and urgent requests for data or analysis. Ideally the ceiling for funding would be higher than USD50,000 (perhaps up to USD100,000), with more flexibility and less cumbersome funding procedures. Project teams have the expertise and experience of challenging and unpredictable environments, so the JDC can afford them the space to work independently. Because UNHCR lacks the analytical capacity of the World Bank, it will be helpful if funding can continue so as to leverage the Bank's analytical capacity by funding analytical consultants who work jointly for both the Bank and UNHCR, for example. To do this, the issue of funding of World Bank staff time for oversight, reporting and administration needs to be resolved.

Overall, this project demonstrates the value the JDC has in facilitating new partnerships. The initial contact between the World Bank MENA Poverty and Equity Global Practice and UNHCR's regional and country offices in the Mashreq region would not have happened without JDC, and several beneficial initiatives have resulted from this collaboration beyond the project itself.

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