

Country: Lebanon

CRRF Pillar: Pillar 3

Actors: MERATH, faith-based organizations

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Good practices in faith-sensitive innovation to build integrated communities: An example from Lebanon

Introduction

This case study is part of a collaborative project carried out by Joint Learning Initiative and UNHCR, which aims to generate locally grounded evidence and identify examples of good practices of local faith community-led responses to refugees across 6 countries: Honduras, Mexico, Uganda, Germany, Bangladesh, and Lebanon. Thirty-five interviews and one focus group among a total of 46 participants were conducted for this case study¹.

Based in Mansourieh El Maten, [MERATH \(Middle East Revive & Thrive\)](#) is the relief and community development arm of the [Lebanese society for Educational & Social Development \(LSESD\)](#). MERATH partners with local churches and Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq to support humanitarian and development interventions across basic needs, education and child protection, livelihoods and local partner capacity building. MERATH does not currently partner with local Muslim faith communities or FBOs, but services are provided to all regardless of ethnicity or religion. This case study details some of the ways in which MERATH and its partners demonstrate good practices in refugee response.

Support for Host Communities

Due to the complicated history of Syrian political and military intervention in Lebanon, many hosts and local faith leaders (LFLs) reported significant resistance and reluctance to supporting Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Many hosts expressed their frustration at the increasing numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and felt that they were a strain on limited resources. Lack of employment opportunities and the influx of cheap Syrian and/or refugee labor undercutting Lebanese living wages were also often cited as a major concern for hosts and a tension between the communities. Many hosts, LFLs and some refugees expressed the belief that direct service provision and material support to host communities in need would be key to disrupting tensions that arose with the influx of Syrian refugees.

In order to navigate strained relations, some LFLs have adopted new strategies that also include support for host communities. One church, for example, was providing basic food items in baskets to Syrian refugees, however they found that the high demand and difficulty in distribution caused further friction with the local community. So, they began going directly to Lebanese neighbors to offer some of the same supports they had been providing to refugees.

¹ Project leads: Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London, and Dr. Olivia Wilkinson, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI). We gratefully acknowledge the efforts and dedication of the researchers in collecting the primary data and analyzing it: Leonie Harsch, Molly Middlehurst (analysis and writing), and Heather Wurtz (analysis and writing).

We also heard many people [from the local community] say ‘why are you only helping them, we are also in need’. So we helped all those who are in need and went to all of the neighbors and gave them a food basket. This is how we solved this problem. Some of the neighbors said that they are not in need, but most of them took the food basket and were very happy. When doctors are visiting us, we send messages to all the neighbors and say that they can come for medical assistance, and they come. So instead of being against us, they thank us for what we do. They now know that we care for everyone; that we try to help everyone and that we love everyone.

As prominent local actors, religious leaders and their churches are closer to these criticisms than more external humanitarian organizations. Although they must constantly navigate these tensions to retain their trusted positions in communities, they may also be particularly well positioned to help bridge divides across social difference through innovative, peace-building practices that respond to local challenges and needs.

Spiritual Support and Religious Motivations

LFLs and FBO employees also play a critical role in enhancing refugee self-reliance through psychosocial and spiritual intervention. Both refugees and Lebanese hosts mentioned the importance of home visits where LFLs or NGOs were able to see the circumstances and needs of refugees first hand and provide various forms of psychosocial support, from guidance on ways to adapt and integrate into a new society to prayers and spiritual counsel. One male refugee described feeling cared for and less alone in home visits: “They come, pray for us, invite us, say that they hope with us that we can return to our country. This is also a form of support. They care for us and visit us and share our worries. It makes us feel a bit more comfortable that there are people who follow up on us and greet us.” Another male refugee who has been in Lebanon for 6 years described members of a church visiting his home and engaging him in interfaith conversations: “When the people from the church visit, they give us lessons on cleanliness and religion, and they pray. We have a conversation about religion, between them as Christians and us as Sunnites.”

Many hosts and LFLs cited religious teachings and values as motivation to support refugees, despite initial resistance and across religious differences. Indeed, many LFLs and hosts felt their religious affiliation and teachings compelled them not only to provide material support to refugees but also to act out of compassion, forgiveness and “love.” According to one male faith leader:

Faith plays an important role in my relationship with refugees because it is the major motivation for offering assistance to them. If there was not our belief in Christ, we would not work with refugees. We respect the holy gospel and it is the basis of our faith and of our life. The gospel teaches us to help the hungry, the ill, the persecuted, and those who are displaced from their homes. We assist refugees because the gospel teaches us to do so. We do this work with love and not as a duty. In addition to the [material] assistance, we offer love to refugees.

The relationships that are built between hosts and refugees include discussions of religion and emotions, which are potentially highly sensitive topics. International and external organizations consider that it is good practice to exercise impartiality and neutrality, often resulting in the avoidance of religion

to maintain distance from perceived affiliation among refugees with partial parties.² However, as the Lebanon case demonstrates, an approach in which LFLs can express their religious beliefs while also respecting the beliefs of others can help create a supportive environment for refugees of diverse religious backgrounds. Local faith actors may affirm their impartiality in assistance by helping all and not discriminating in their services, while also engaging in prayer, discussing religious similarities and differences, and speaking about emotional and spiritual topics with people who have been displaced.

One female respondent who traveled from Syria to Lebanon as a refugee 16 years ago and told the interviewer she still identifies as a refugee rather than a member of the local/host community, reported feeling welcome by Christian faith leaders despite the fact that she is Sunni:

The people who serve in the church have hearts which are maybe like the heart of Jesus Christ. They resemble Jesus because they don't want to see anyone being sad, tired, or in need. I didn't see anyone like them, they are wonderful. A friend of my husband informed us about the church and I came there. They received me and welcomed me. They are very respectful. I am Sunni, but I liked them.

Another female refugee from Syria echoed this sentiment: “I am Muslim, but when I attend prayers, it comforts me spiritually and emotionally. [It comforts me] when they give me patience in daily life with the community of the country in which I am living.” This acknowledges the agency of refugees and the local faith actors in host communities to engage in complex and nuanced relationships in which faith plays a supportive role.

Local faith actors are often on the front lines of promoting inclusion and resilience of refugee populations. Acknowledging that some local faith actors can also reinforce exclusionary practices, the research presented in this case study has instead pointed towards good practice examples in which local faith actors have led their wider communities to challenge discrimination against displaced people and promote their social integration. Local faith actors can stand against populist currents to call for the population around them to welcome the stranger – this can be through teaching from scriptural bases but also by working from the social and spiritual capital of faith communities to act for inclusion rather than marginalization.

Key Reflections for the CRRF good practices database

- Material assistance of local residents, such as food distribution, along with refugee aid provides **support for host communities** while promoting **social cohesion** by easing tensions between host and refugee groups.
- Interventions of faith-based organizations, such as home visits and inter-faith dialogue, **enhance refugee self-reliance and inclusivity**.
- Despite the attempts of many organizations to avoid religious activities in order to maintain impartiality, this case demonstrates the role of spirituality in creating a **supportive environment** and **dignified reception conditions for refugees**, as well as **promoting resilience** and respect for diversity throughout the local community.

² Alastair Ager and Joey Ager, *Faith, Secularism, and Humanitarian Engagement: Finding the Place of Religion in the Support of Displaced Communities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Olivia Wilkinson, “‘Faith Can Come in, but Not Religion’: Secularity and Its Effects on the Disaster Response to Typhoon Haiyan,” *Disasters* 42, no. 3 (October 24, 2017): 459–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12258>.

