



Syrian children gather outside a school in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, September 2015. Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

RIGHT TO A FUTURE

Empowering refugees from Syria and host governments to face a long-term crisis

With no end to the conflict in Syria in sight, the four million people forced to flee the country have no foreseeable prospect of safe return. And as the impact of the crisis on neighbouring countries grows and aid dries up, the situation for these refugees is becoming increasingly dire.

This briefing calls for a new approach by the international community, including Syria's neighbours; one which offers hope, safety and dignity to the millions of refugees, and gives them a chance to contribute to the societies and economies of their hosts.



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SUMMARY

For nearly five years now, the world has been witnessing the unfolding of one of the largest displacement crises since World War II. Fleeing a devastating civil war that has already claimed the lives of more than a quarter of a million people, more than four million people have left Syria¹ and found temporary shelter in neighbouring countries. This year, driven by a loss of hope and worsening living conditions across the Middle East, Syrian refugees have taken to risky migration to Europe in larger numbers than ever. Their arrival has signalled more clearly the need to create a radical new approach to managing the mass displacement across the wider Euro-Mediterranean region.

Most refugee crises last for ten years or more,² and there is little to suggest that the current crisis in Syria will fall outside this trend. As the situation inside Syria continues to deteriorate, there is no foreseeable prospect for the safe return of refugees. At the same time, the main refugee-hosting countries – Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan – are all facing enormous and diverse economic and social challenges as a consequence of the crisis. These challenges range from localized demographic shifts to pressure on infrastructure, public services and labour markets.

The scale and duration of the crisis mean that emergency humanitarian responses, while as necessary as ever, are no longer enough. Humanitarian aid must now be complemented by more sustainable approaches to help refugees and host communities cope in the medium and longer terms. Over the past year, the governments of Syria's neighbours, in cooperation with international aid agencies and donors, have increasingly recognized this reality. Together, they have developed a so-called 'resilience agenda'³ to help refugee-hosting countries deal with the huge burden associated with supporting refugees from Syria.

But for the refugees themselves, increased vulnerability, not resilience, is the norm. More and more refugees are being pushed to make desperate choices. Children are forced to leave school and work illegally, girls are forced into marriage before their time, and many have little option but to risk their lives on dangerous boat journeys in the hope of reaching Europe, or even to return to Syria.

This briefing highlights the pressing needs faced by refugees and host communities and describes the possible pathways towards a new approach by Syria's neighbours and the international community. This approach would offer hope, safety and dignity to the millions who have fled Syria, and a chance to contribute to the societies and economies of their host countries by offering them greater social and economic opportunities as refugees.

Such an approach entails host countries addressing the legal and policy barriers that prevent refugees from building a dignified existence in their temporary displacement. It pays special attention to the issues of legal stay in their host countries and their ability to support themselves and their families better and to access services. For its part, the international community must recognize that refugee-hosting states cannot and should not take these necessary steps on their own. This presumes a commitment to providing stable and predictable long-term

funding and investment in building the technical capacity of host countries to manage the displacement and its consequences.

The alternative future is one of missed opportunities, not only for millions of refugees from Syria, but also for neighbouring countries to leverage the positive contributions that these refugees can make.

To address the challenges facing refugees and the countries that received them, seven organizations call on international donors and refugee-hosting governments to work together on five different areas:

- **Ensuring the ‘resilience agenda’ benefits the most vulnerable.** The resilience agenda should include and benefit all those affected by displacement – including refugees and vulnerable members of host communities.
- **Enabling refugees from Syria to reside in neighbouring countries legally without discrimination.** Procedures to maintain valid documentation and registration must be clear, accessible, and affordable.
- **Allowing refugees from Syria to access basic services,** including adequate and affordable education, medical care and housing, without compromising the quality of public services for host communities. This means significant new investment in national institutions and infrastructure to boost service delivery.
- **Supporting refugees to be more self-reliant** through greater livelihoods opportunities, without negatively affecting the economies of host communities. Donors and host governments should work together to unlock the potential economic contribution that refugees can make to meet their basic needs, while also benefiting the countries where they temporarily reside.
- **Ensuring countries neighbouring Syria receive adequate support** to change policies and practices to allow refugees and the communities hosting them to cope better; pending a political solution to the conflict in Syria and options for the safe return of refugees or resettlement or other forms of admission to third countries.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, UNHCR, 'Syria Regional Refugee Response, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal', <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, last accessed 29 October 2015.
- 2 Crawford, Cosgrave, Haysome and Walicki, 'Protracted Displacement: Uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile', Overseas Development Institute, September 2015, p.5, <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9851.pdf>, last accessed 31 October 2015
- 3 A Resilience Development Forum (RDF) will be held by UNDP 8– 9 November 2015 in Jordan. The RDF will bring together key humanitarian and development stakeholders to create a fundamental shift in the way the international community is responding to the continuing crisis in Syria and the surrounding region. See <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/events/2015/november/8-9-november---resilience-development-forum.html>, last accessed 31 October 2015

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