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## Effects of Extreme Poverty on Refugees and Vulnerable Host Communities in Lebanon

Submission to UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty

*This submission is produced by the Refugee Rights and Protection team at ALEF – Act for Human Rights, with input from members of the Persons Affected by the Syrian Crisis Working Group (PASC WG). PASC is a network of 25 local NGOs that work on a range of protection issues affecting refugees and vulnerable host communities. ALEF is a Lebanese human rights organization and facilitates the PASC WG.*

### Introduction

Compounding crises and traumas have led to an untenable social and economic situation in Lebanon for all who reside in the country. Refugees, migrants, and the Lebanese host community have been suffering from the effects of the economic collapse, rise in unemployment, Beirut explosion, and COVID-19 lockdowns.<sup>1</sup> Since the end of 2019, the Lebanese Pound experienced a 90% depreciation and is continuing in this downward trend, while the cost of consumer products has inflated at alarming rates.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent ESCWA report, the percentage of the population living in multidimensional poverty nearly doubled from 42% in 2019 to 82% in 2021, with 40% of this group living in extreme multidimensional poverty.<sup>3</sup>

### Impact of the economic crisis on the vulnerable in Lebanon

The economic crisis has led to resource shortages across the country; securing the basic necessities – fuel, water, medicine, food, and shelter – has become a struggle. Subsidies on a range of products have been lifted abruptly over the past year while purchasing power has plummeted.<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, the Lebanese government – in the process of gradually

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, July 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/77872>; Lebanon Protection Consortium (LPC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC), July 2020, “In Constant Fear of Eviction; An Analysis of Shelter Insecurity for Vulnerable Refugee Households in Lebanon During COVID-19”, <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/in-constant-fear-of-eviction/>

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, May 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western ASIA (ESCWA), September 2021, [https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634- multidimensional\\_poverty\\_in\\_lebanon\\_policy\\_brief\\_en.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634- multidimensional_poverty_in_lebanon_policy_brief_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Daraj, July 2021, “Lebanon: The Economic Crisis and Period Poverty”, [https://daraj.com/en/75915/#:~:text=In%20conjunction%20with%20the%20crazy,a%20320%25%20increase%20in%20Lebanon.&text=This%20prompts%20women%20to%20reuse,dire%20consequences%20on%20women's%20bodies](https://daraj.com/en/75915/#:~:text=In%20conjunction%20with%20the%20crazy,a%20320%25%20increase%20in%20Lebanon.&text=This%20prompts%20women%20to%20reuse,dire%20consequences%20on%20women's%20bodies;);

removing state subsidies on fuel – had increased the price for fuel four times in the last month alone.<sup>5</sup> Bread prices have also increased seven times in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

Many NGOs and humanitarian workers have reported that impoverished families are resorting to negative coping mechanisms, such as skipping meals, ignoring medical issues, or even turning to risky practices to earn wages, such as dealing in drugs and sex work.<sup>7</sup> These dangerous survival practices have been particularly noted among persons with more than one category of vulnerability, such as refugees with a disability or who are LGBTQ+, as they are even more likely to face discrimination in employment, exploitation and abuse.<sup>8</sup>

In a country sorely lacking adequate social safety nets, vulnerable community members traditionally relied on support from extended family members, friends, and neighbors to get through difficult times. This community support system masked the real toll of vulnerabilities in the country but, with the middle class quickly shrinking, many of those helpers are now, themselves, in need of help.<sup>9</sup> These shrinking support systems have particularly devastated older persons and persons with disabilities, who are overrepresented among the population living in poverty.<sup>10</sup>

Refugees and migrants, many of whom already live in informal tented settlements or in camps with crumbling infrastructure, have been especially debilitated by the electricity, fuel, and water shortages.<sup>11</sup> Many refugees live in remote areas and must use public or private transportation to reach work or even to collect aid. But the cost of transportation has become a major obstacle to receipt of aid and livelihood opportunities; some refugees reported that their daily cost of

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Bloomberg, February 2021, “Lebanese Inflation Hits Record High as Food Prices Soar 400%”, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-11/lebanese-inflation-hits-record-high-as-food-prices-soar-400>

<sup>5</sup> Kareem Chehayeb, October 2021, <https://twitter.com/chehayebk/status/1446329187472658465?s=21>

<sup>6</sup> AP News, July 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-lebanon-beirut-222130c8a79c87f19391350a14999c97>

<sup>7</sup> Based on ALEF conversations with partner organizations;

Nabulsi D, Ismail H, Abou Hassan F, Sacca L, Honein-AbouHaidar G, Jomaa L, December 2020, “Voices of the vulnerable: Exploring the livelihood strategies, coping mechanisms and their impact on food insecurity, health and access to health care among Syrian refugees in the Beqaa region of Lebanon.” PLoS ONE 15(12): e0242421. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0242421>

<sup>8</sup> Advocate, August 2020, “LGBTQ+ People In Beirut Are Suffering As Lebanon Continues to Bleed”, <https://bit.ly/3dqfgni>.

<sup>9</sup> Arabian Business, August 2020, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/451264-beirut-life-stories-we-used-to-be-from-the-so-called-middle-class-now-we-are-broken>; Foreign Policy, May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/21/lebanon-coronavirus-middle-class-poverty/>

<sup>10</sup> ALEF bilateral discussion with Caritas Lebanon October 5, 2021; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western ASIA (ESCWA), September 2021, [https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634- multidimensional\\_poverty\\_in\\_lebanon\\_policy\\_brief\\_en.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634- multidimensional_poverty_in_lebanon_policy_brief_en.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Based on ALEF participation in multilateral protection group meetings in June and July 2021.

transportation to their workplace is equivalent to their daily wages, while others stated that they are unable to cover transportation to the ATMs where they collect their cash assistance.<sup>12</sup>

### **Children and women increasingly at risk in public and private spaces**

The economic situation has had a very detrimental effect on the protection and development of children in Lebanon. School enrollment rates dropped among refugees and vulnerable Lebanese while over 50,000 students transferred from private to public schools, straining public school capacities.<sup>13</sup> In some areas of the country, the overall dropout rate reached 30% and, as of 2019, only 42% of Syrian refugee children were enrolled in school.<sup>14</sup> Children from vulnerable households missed out on education during the Covid-19 pandemic as many lacked the tools needed for online learning such as electronic devices and access to an internet connection.<sup>15</sup> Child labor nearly doubled since 2019, most notably among young boys, but also among young girls who often work as street vendors, placing them in an extremely vulnerable situation.<sup>16</sup>

Since the COVID-19 outbreak across Lebanon and accompanying lockdowns, women's rights and child protection organizations have been sounding the alarm on the rise in domestic violence and child abuse, especially among refugees. Himaya, a child protection NGO, noted that the financial crisis and lockdowns had a significant psychosocial impact on many families, leading to an increase in violence and abuse against women and children. Yet, these abuses were more likely to be kept hidden within the household, as community-based and on-site NGO activities were put on hold and schools closed.<sup>17</sup> NGOs that offer protection to women and girls also reported that cases of domestic violence increased rapidly, with one hotline receiving triple the number of calls in 2020 to their national helpline for victims of SGBV.<sup>18</sup>

### **Insecure housing and evictions**

The deteriorating situation in the country has put an increased number of Syrian refugees and other vulnerable groups at risk of being evicted from their homes. According to Caritas Lebanon,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> L'Orient Today, March 2021, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1256711/as-school-enrollment-drops-amid-prolonged-closures-in-lebanon-child-labor-rates-among-syrian-refugee-children-are-on-the-rise.html>

<sup>14</sup> Al Shaq Al Aawsat, March 2021, <https://rb.gy/mrrlgg>; Human Rights Watch, March 2021, (summarizing findings of VASyR 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/26/lebanon-action-needed-syrian-refugee-education-crisis>

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, February 2021, "VASyR 2020: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Alef discussions with partner organizations; <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1256711/as-school-enrollment-drops-amid-prolonged-closures-in-lebanon-child-labor-rates-among-syrian-refugee-children-are-on-the-rise.html>

<sup>17</sup> Bilateral discussion between ALEF and Himaya, February 17, 2021, <https://www.himaya.org/>

<sup>18</sup> Bilateral discussion between ALEF and ABAAD, February 26, 2021, <https://www.abaadmena.org/>;

ABAAD, May 2020, "Our Response to GBV During the COVID-19 Pandemic",

<https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1590737262.pdf>; ABAAD, June-August 2020, "ABAAD's Response to GBV During the Crises in Lebanon", <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1601377248.pdf>

those unable to effort rent, have had to relocate to accommodations that are unsafe, unsanitary, or over-crowded.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, widespread misinformation that refugees receive assistance in USD has prompted some property owners to ask for the rent to be paid in USD or at the black-market equivalent, which led to many de facto evictions. Yet even those property owners who tried to be accommodating, in some cases allowing up to 14 months of unpaid rent, eventually had to issue evictions to defaulting tenants.<sup>20</sup>

Refugees are also facing ongoing crackdowns on informal tented settlements (ITS).<sup>21</sup> Domestic law prohibits the use of any foundational building materials in ITSs, such as cement or bricks. As such, many refugees find themselves having to choose between living in extremely unsound shelters that do not protect against the elements, or breaching the law and risking being evicted entirely. In some cases, the government also rescinds permission to use public land for ITSs, usually citing government projects planned to be developed on that land.<sup>22</sup>

### **Rising social tensions**

The decline of the Lebanese economy combined with real or perceived inequalities in terms of receipt of aid and competition over employment, has manifested in increased incidences of violence or harassment between refugees or migrants and the host community. One example is the burning of the Minyeh camp in North Lebanon in late 2020, which followed a dispute between a Lebanese employer and Syrian workers over unpaid wages. While this incident was condemned by local authorities and the host community – many of whom took in some of the displaced until other arrangements could be made – it demonstrated the dangerous levels of discord that have resulted from the economic crisis.<sup>23</sup>

Severe shortages of basic goods and competition for aid have also led to boiling tensions, as local communities find their situation deteriorating but perceive that more aid is given to refugees than to vulnerable Lebanese. NGOs providing aid packages to migrants have noted that their beneficiaries or field staff experienced an increase in harassment from locals. Some NGOs also faced issues from municipalities when political factions requested the personal details of aid recipients, creating problems of confidentiality and safety.<sup>24</sup>

Refugees have, themselves, reported feeling increased pressure to return to Syria from both, the government and host community.<sup>4</sup> The most recent Refugee Protection Watch survey found that

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<sup>19</sup> Bilateral discussion between ALEF and Caritas Lebanon, October 5, 2021

<sup>20</sup> Eviction Trends Update from LPC-IRC, February 2021

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, January 2021 “Lebanon: Dire Conditions for Syrian Refugees in Border Town”, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/19/lebanon-dire-conditions-syrian-refugees-border-town>

<sup>22</sup> Bilateral discussion with partner organization, February 4, 2021

<sup>23</sup> Albawaba, December 2020, <https://www.albawaba.com/news/lebanon-eight-people-arrested-after-syrian-refugee-camp-was-set-fire-1401602>

<sup>24</sup> Based on ALEF discussions with migrant aid organizations (October 2021) and participation in multilateral protection group meetings (June and July 2021).

85% of respondents feel that there is an increase in social tensions between communities, while 76% of respondents feel that there is an increasing pressure on them to leave Lebanon.<sup>25</sup>

## Funding

Soon after the economic crisis began in late 2019, some large depositors – usually with political connections - transferred roughly 10 billion dollars out of Lebanon. This, combined with the local banks' practice of purchasing Central Bank bonds to cover State payments on international loans, led to a severe dollar shortage when the Central Bank defaulted on its international debts.<sup>26</sup> As a result, many depositors lost 70% of the value of their accounts overnight. Many NGOs also saw their donor funding forcibly converted to liras at unfavorable exchange rates, which impacted their capacities greatly.<sup>27</sup> Despite successful efforts by local and international stakeholders to allow NGOs to access better exchange rates, preferential rates remain at least 10-30% below market rate, which means banks are taking a cut of this aid and recuperating dollar losses at the expense of NGOs and their beneficiaries.<sup>28</sup>

Adding to this strain on NGOs, funding from donors has been reduced as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when developing countries require more support than ever.<sup>29</sup> Yet, donors are hesitant to encourage prolonged cash assistance and other interventions that they fear create dependency. However, as the country grapples with one of the most severe economic crises since the 19th century, humanitarian actors argue that increased aid is vital, even if dependency unavoidable, as the alternative would be far worse.<sup>30</sup>

## Recommendations

- The international community and donors to provide emergency funding to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis for vulnerable population, regardless of whether they are refugee, migrants, or Lebanese.
- Support the calls for more flexible, multi-year funding, that allow local NGOs to respond to the needs of beneficiaries based on their knowledge of the context and expertise on best programs to implement.

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<sup>25</sup> Refugee Protection Watch, September 2021, <http://refugeeprotectionwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/RWP-INFO-GRAPHIC-20210902-1-1-1.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Anadolu Agency, February 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/lebanese-cannot-access-money-in-banks-since-late-2019/2158782#>

<sup>27</sup> Reuters, June 2021, "Lebanese banks swallow at least \$250m in U.N. aid" <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-aid-trfn-idUSKCN2DT1CH>

<sup>28</sup> Based on ALEF discussions with partner NGOs

<sup>29</sup> 3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis, September 2021, [https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/3RP\\_Progress\\_Report2021.pdf](https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/3RP_Progress_Report2021.pdf);

<sup>30</sup> Based on ALEF discussion with partner NGOs;

World Bank, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2021-lebanon-sinking-to-the-top-3>

- Urge the Lebanese Government to take urgent action to ensure all children in Lebanon regain access to education.
- Call on the Government of Lebanon to ensure protection from forced evictions and temporarily permit refugees in ITSs to live in secure shelters with better infrastructure until another solution can be found.
- Call on the Government of Lebanon and political officials to refrain from discriminatory and divisive rhetoric scapegoating refugees and migrants, and to apply equal protection of the law when refugees and migrants face harassment or abuse.
- Call on the Lebanese government to implement subsidization programs that reduce the cost of living for vulnerable Lebanese, migrants, and refugees in the country, and ensure their ability to access education, transport, health care, and other necessary services.