



SIPGI WORKING PAPER NO.2. 2023

THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONS ON SYRIAN REFUGEES IN JORDAN

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Prepared for the Role
of Political and Social
Institutions in the
Integration of
Refugees into Host
Cities Conference

The Impact of Institutions on Syrian Refugees in Jordan

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1. Introduction

Over 700,000 registered, and as many as 1.4 million in total, Syrian refugees currently reside in Jordan after escaping the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, and which continues to this day. The Jordanian government, with the collaboration of NGOs and aid from the international community, has actively worked on housing Syrian refugees and managing the constraints of the labor market, housing, limited resources, healthcare, and other factors that influence the quality of life of Syrian refugees in Jordan. Institutions have simultaneously attempted to aid refugees while preventing the influx of Syrian refugees from negatively impacting host communities. While the Jordanian government has laid out ambitious plans for aiding refugees, those plans have only received partial funding. NGOs have filled some of the gaps by providing refugees with services in education, health, technical training, resource distribution, and other critical areas. Both the Jordanian government and the NGOs have successfully eased the transitions of many refugees and provided valuable aid. However, these institutions have also been unable to keep refugees out of poverty, have not enabled Syrian refugees to fully assimilate into Jordan, and have not provided long-term solutions.

The Jordanian government outlined its plan for refugees in the Jordan Response Plan, the most recent of which was approved for 2020-2022, with a total cost needed to implement the plan of approximately \$6,607,129,404, with \$2,839,705,520 needed in direct budget support (Government of Jordan 2020). However, getting aid is becoming increasingly difficult for both the Jordanian government and NGOs. The Syrian civil war is in its eleventh year, without an end in sight. The longevity of the war has led to it receiving less international attention, and both individuals and nations alike are experiencing donor fatigue. Lack of funding is forcing many NGOs to downsize or close their programs. For example, the World Food Program (WFP) stopped

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providing aid to 21,000 Syrian refugees in 2021 due to insufficient funding (World Food Program 2021). Some international aid groups have cut aid to Syrian refugees in order to aid refugees in Ukraine, causing the funding shortage to grow more dire. In August 2022, UNHCR requested over \$30 million to aid Syrian refugees in Jordan and to continue to provide services, including cash assistance (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor 2022). The lack of funding has led to concerns about the feasibility of keeping Syrian refugees in Jordan long term.

The fact that the Jordanian government depends on donor funding to aid refugees partially limits which actions it is willing to take. For example, "The Jordanian monarchy under King Abdullah II has a vested interest in preventing this number of 'highly visible'" refugees from shrinking, as this could lead to cuts to Jordan's entitlement to benefits" (Bank 2016). This incentivizes maintaining large refugee camps, as refugees living in host communities are less visible. Currently, refugees are only allowed to leave the refugee camps to settle in host communities if a Jordanian sponsors them. This is likely motivated by both the need for refugee camps to remain visible and to mitigate the impact of refugees on host communities. NGOs are also limited by the need for donor support and are sometimes unable to provide the services that are necessary for refugees but which are unappealing to donors. For example, one NGO employee said, "I mean, who is going to fund teacher training or empowerment programs for young boys? However, young boys do need attention, also. But the West seems to be afraid of them, of the Syrian refugee youth. No one wants to fund programs for young men" (Campbell & Tobin 2016). As the quote demonstrates, NGOs are restrained by what donors are willing to support, limiting the assistance for certain at-risk groups. Donor funding is one of the largest factors determining institutions' ability to offer refugee programs.

2. Education

Education is a valuable way for Syrian refugees to improve their circumstances. However, Syrian refugees face many barriers to receiving an education, barriers that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated. Of the Syrian refugees in Jordan, over 200,000 are school-aged children (Human Rights Watch 2016). As few as 25% of secondary-school-age (approximate aged 16 to 18) Syrian refugee children are in school (Stauffer 2017). Refugees are also more likely to face additional barriers, such as being unable to afford school supplies and transportation to and

from school. The Syrian refugee children who are in school are also more likely than Jordanian students to have behavioral issues, and often teachers have not received the training to meet refugee children's needs (Alkhaldeh 2018). Syrian refugees also face challenging adjustments to a new education curriculum, the challenge of learning English in school (French is taught in Syria), and adjustment to a different Arabic dialect being spoken (Alkhaldeh 2018). The Jordanian government has worked to accommodate refugee's educational needs by creating schools in refugee camps and catch-up schools (to allow students who have spent a significant time out of school to be reintegrated into the educational system). Additionally, Syrian refugees, like Jordanians, have free access to public education.

While these opportunities are extremely valuable for Syrian refugees, they are also sometimes limited to those who can provide birth certificates and hold service cards issued by the Ministry of the Interior (Esveld 2016). Furthermore, access to public education institutions may be denied to individuals who cannot prove their previous educational history as children are also not allowed to join public schools if they have been out of school for more than three years (Stauffer 2017). The requirement for documents may serve as a barrier to refugees who lost their official documents fleeing Syria. The Ministry of Education established the Catch-up Program, which is intended to help Syrian children who have been out of school for years reintegrate into the education system. However, institutions have not created comparable programs for adult refugees that dropped out of school and were unable to return. Some resources are available for adult refugees who wish to attend university many universities in Jordan reduce fees for Syrian refugees. Moreover, some scholarships are available for Syrian refugees, including the DAFI Scholarship and the European Union-funded EDU-SYRIA/EDU-JORDAN program. While there are additional donor funds for Syrian refugees, Syrian refugees that do not receive scholarships or attend refugee accommodating universities will pay a higher rate than their Jordanian counterparts because they will be charged the foreign tuition rate.

Despite the support that Syrian refugees can receive, many, at all education levels, may feel unmotivated to continue their education because to do so will not necessarily correspond to improved job prospects, due to the poor state of the labor market. Another significant threat to the education of Syrian refugees is also tied to the labor market; the inability of parents to provide

financially for their children may lead to children dropping out of school to enter into child marriages or to join the workforce. UNICEF had tried to combat the school dropout trend by offering cash grants to 55,000 children on the condition that they remain in school. However funding restrictions have caused the program to be reduced to 10,000 children (Stauffer 2017). Other organizations working to educate children in Jordan include the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Save the Children, Madrasati, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This support benefits both Syrian refugee children and Jordanian children. While there are many organizations dedicated to improving education in Jordan, they have been far more successful at the primary school level than at the secondary school level (Stauffer 2017). This is primarily because, at the secondary school level, there is greater pressure for children to marry or join the workforce. Therefore, the institutions offering educational support may need to put a greater focus on incentivizing secondary school education.

Many Jordanian schools suffer from overcrowding, which can worsen the quality of education. Overcrowded schools are especially prevalent in densely populated areas, including those with large immigrant populations. If left unchecked, this worsening education quality could incentivize students (especially Syrian refugees who are often in vulnerable economic positions) to drop out of school and do something they find more meaningful, such as joining the labor market. In order to address this overcrowding, schools often operate in double shifts, with some children attending school in the morning and others attending school in the afternoon. The double shift system typically divides Jordanians (who go to school in the morning) from Syrians (who attend school in the afternoon), although some schools operate differently (Double Shift). This system has been more effective than teaching children in overcrowded schools; however, it has some drawbacks. Firstly, it does not address the inadequacy of other school resources, including teachers and educational supplies. Secondly, it shortened class time for both Jordanian and Syrian students, which is harmful to the education of both groups. Lastly, by dividing Syrian and Jordanian children, Syrian children become more isolated, and their assimilation into Jordan is hindered (Double Shift). While double-shift schools offer a short-term solution to the Syrian crisis, more long-term options are needed, as Syria remains unsafe for refugees to return to.

3. Labor Market

Jordan signed the Jordan compact in 2016, which initially allowed Syrian refugees to enter the labor market with support from the European Union. This support enabled over 200,000 Syrian refugees to enter the workforce (International Labor Organization 2017). However, Syrian refugees were only allowed to work in specific industries, including construction and manufacturing. While permits give Syrians more employment stability, a lack of information has made Syrian refugees hesitant to get work permits because they do not understand how to obtain one, feel the process is too difficult, or fear that they will be ineligible for aid. The advantages of having a formal work permit include having a greater likelihood of having a written contract with an employer, health insurance, and paid sick leave (Stave et al. 2021). Statistically, Syrian refugees who have a work permit also get paid more. "While about 37 percent of employed Syrians without a valid work permit earn less than 150 JOD per month, about 20 percent of employed Syrians with valid work permits earn such low wages" (Stave et al. 2021). Additionally, Syrians working informally without work permits constantly fear being caught and deported.

Despite the numerous benefits of having a work permit, most Syrian refugees do not have one. Some programs are working to combat Syrian refugees' uncertainty about labor force participation. One such program is an online class released by the International Labor Organization (ILO) to teach Syrian refugees about their rights in the labor force and to explain the benefits of applying for a work permit and joining the formal labor sector (United Nations 2017). In addition to the lack of reliable information about work permits, the difficulty of obtaining a work permit deters many Syrian refugees. One of the barriers for Syrian refugees obtaining a work permit is financial. While Jordanian law states that employers are supposed to pay for refugees' work permits, in practice workers are expected to pay for the work permit themselves, costing, typically, between 170 and 370 Jordanian Dinars (International Labor Organization 2015). Additionally, a passport is required to obtain a work permit, which many Syrian refugees lack. Also, in order to receive a work permit, refugees must have a single employer willing to sponsor them and must work in an industry where work permits are available. This limits Syrian refugees who are doing freelance work or working in certain industries (International Labor Organization 2017).

Even if Syrian refugees can overcome the barriers to applying for a work permit, the likelihood that they will get declined is high. There is concern about Syrian refugees competing with Jordanian citizens for the same low-skill jobs (International Labor Organization 2015). This leads to the denial of many refugee work permits. The lack of availability of work permits keeps Syrian refugees in the informal sector, where they do not pay taxes to the Jordanian government. This has led to the government increasing taxes such as sales tax (AlShwawra 2021). Due to their limited options and desperate need for income, Syrian refugees working in the informal sector often accept lower wages and worse working conditions than Jordanian employees.

Issues in the labor market have led to problems such as food insecurity. "Only 2 percent of refugee households can meet their essential food needs without any negative coping strategies, which include cutting down on meals, pulling children out of school, early marriage, and sending family members to beg" (Karasapan 2022). The Jordanian government has helped mitigate food insecurity by subsidizing some goods, including bread, electricity, and water, for all people in Jordan (International Labor Organization 2015). NGOs have helped address the problems of Syrian refugees who struggle to earn a consistent income by distributing food vouchers, cash stipends, and other forms of social assistance. These measures have been beneficial to refugees. However, a lack of information has critically impacted Syrian refugees in Jordan. For example, many do not have information about when they will receive aid, forcing them to dedicate time and resources to figuring out the aid schedule. Some NGOs have implemented cash-for-work programs that allow Syrian refugees to work for NGOs for up to six hours a day for between one and two dinars an hour (Campbell & Tobin 2016). While this does provide refugees with valuable income, the income is limited, and refugees primarily view it as a volunteer program rather than a job.

Syrian refugee women in Jordan face additional challenges, including lack of access to social security. 33% of households in Jordan are female-headed, and these women often turn toward selling handmade crafts or food items (Leghtas 2018). This informal work allows these women to reconcile their income needs with household and childcare responsibilities. However, many women are unable to register these businesses legally. Some NGOs are working to address the exclusion of women from the formal labor market. For example, a limited number of women received seamstress training and were allowed to work outside of the Za'atari refugee camp

(Dupire 2018). They viewed this training not only as a way to immediately earn income in factory jobs but also as a skill that could allow them to work from home in the future. Although this program has only helped a few hundred women, it demonstrates how NGOs can help women monetize socially acceptable forms of labor. However, it is not only social norms that prevent Syrian women from working; many women who would otherwise enter the labor market do not do so due to a lack of available childcare and good jobs. Therefore, improving the labor market and more childcare provision are necessary to better integrate Syrian women into the workforce.

Both Jordanians and Syrians alike struggle with high rates of unemployment in Jordan. "Unemployment was 25 percent in early 2021, with youth unemployment at a record 48.1 percent" (Karasapan, 2022). Additionally, debt is a critical issue for refugees. Two-thirds of refugee families in Za'atari report that they are in debt. Debt is also a fact of life for the 85-90% of refugees who live outside of the refugee camps and are forced to pay for rent and public transportation. 85% of Syrian refugees living outside of the camps report being in debt (UNHCR, 2022). Moreover, the majority of Syrian refugees live below the poverty line. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the challenges in the labor market, causing many in Jordan to lose their jobs, with Syrian refugees especially affected.

The pandemic saw closures in many of the industries, such as construction and customer services, to which Syrian refugees are relegated (International Labor Organization 2017). Furthermore, the government ensured that they hired Jordanians rather than Syrian refugees when businesses reopened. Many NGOs were forced to close temporarily during the pandemic, although they have since reopened. As a result, many Syrian refugee families struggled to meet their basic needs (in 2020, UNHCR provided monthly cash assistance to approximately 30,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugee families [UNHCR 2021]) and consequently many children dropped out of school and joined the workforce. "Already the percentage of children going out to work rather than attending school has increased from 1% in 2019 to more than 13% in 2020" (Regional Strategic Overview 2020).

4. Healthcare

Many Syrian refugees in Jordan suffer from poor mental health problems due to factors such as experiencing trauma in their home country or having difficulty acclimating to life in their host country. Therefore, the mental health institutions available in Jordan are a critical factor in how well Syrian refugees can integrate into life in Jordan. Many Syrian refugees do not seek mental health support due to the cost of treatment or transportation expenses. Those who do are forced to travel great distances due to a lack of nearby mental health providers. Education about mental health has its limits, so many individuals may not recognize that they are suffering from a mental health problem. Finally, negative perceptions about mental health problems may stop people from seeking treatment, so as to avoid adverse reactions from their spouses, family, friends, and the community (Bawadi et al. 2021). If institutions wish to provide adequate mental health support to Syrian refugees, they must do more to educate refugee communities, including at the primary school level (Bawadi et al. 2021).

Many Syrian refugees also suffer from poor physical health. Some bear the lasting effects of traumatic injuries, others suffer from chronic diseases, and many face the impact of living in unsanitary conditions. Syrian refugees received free healthcare at the beginning of the refugee crisis (2012-2014). Then in 2018, the Jordanian government made substantial cuts to the healthcare subsidy Syrian refugees receive. "In its latest Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2018-2020, Jordan noted that 36 per cent of urban refugees cannot afford needed medicines or health services" (Dupire 2018). The healthcare cuts have led to Syrian refugees, including those suffering from chronic medical conditions, making fewer visits to the doctor.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided additional healthcare challenges for refugees. The Jordanian government responded by setting up a vaccine registration program for asylum seekers, with the Jordanian Ministry of Health and UNHCR collaboratively opening a vaccination center at Za'atari camp. Mobile vaccination was also available for those unable to make it to the vaccination center. In addition, The World Food Program helped provide food to households in quarantine. It can be said, therefore, that institutions were able to successfully support Syrian refugee healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Housing

Some refugees live in camps, the largest of which are Za'atari and Azraq. In 2013, refugees at the Za'atari camp were provided with static caravans, replacing the tents that they had before. "Their life span is six to eight years, meaning that most of them are now in need of urgent repair. According to a recent assessment, over 70 per cent of shelters now have walls, floors, and ceilings that are considered sub-standard" (Carlisle 2022). This is an example of a larger issue in refugee care in Jordan; measures have been taken to temporarily provide for Syrian refugees, but there are no long-term plans in place. This is concerning, as the conditions for the refugees are deteriorating. Previously, refugees in the Za'atari refugee camp had access to electricity for 12 hours a day, but it has now been reduced to 9 (Carlisle 2022).

Refugees in the camps have access to many services provided by NGOs, including food and water distribution. However, aid is often sporadic, and the inconsistent aid schedule forces Syrian refugees to dedicate time to determining when and where they can receive aid, time that could be better spent caring for their families or earning money. The International NGO program facilitates communication and coordination between NGOs to reach common goals, but inefficient coordination between NGOs leads to some refugees receiving duplicate aid benefits while others receive none at all.

The vast majority of refugees live in host communities. One primary incentive to live in a host community rather than the refugee camps is better access to the labor market. However, many refugees who do so cannot afford rent and are at risk of eviction. As with the refugees living in camps, such refugees also suffer from inadequate shelter, often citing mold and poor infrastructure. Additionally, the presence of refugees stretches limited resources and causes prices to rise in host communities, resulting in some tension between Syrian refugees and native Jordanians.

6. Conclusion

While the Jordanian government and NGOs have ensured that Syrian refugees can get by in Jordan, they still face many barriers, including the inability to access the legal workforce, lack of information about their rights, and inconsistent aid schedules. Inadequate opportunities for Syrians in the workforce have, to some degree, undermined efforts to educate Syrian refugee children. Syrian refugees often drop out of school to help support their families. Also, education seems less appealing when it does not improve career prospects. In addition, there is insufficient integration of women into the labor market, a role they desperately need. Resettlement is unrealistic mainly due to the unwillingness of most European countries to take a large number of refugees. As European countries experience donor fatigue and international refugee organizations are spread thin by the war in Ukraine, conditions are deteriorating for Syrian refugees. If the refugee crisis continues to overstretch Jordanian resources and conditions deteriorate for both Syrian refugees and Jordanians, there is concern that anti-refugee sentiment might become more widespread.

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