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Briefing paper

## Brussels Syria Conference April 2018

The Syrian armed conflict is now in its eighth year. It is a war which has created the largest current displacement crisis in the world. Of particular concern are the needs of people living in besieged and hard to reach areas, where access for humanitarian workers is almost impossible and IHL is violated on a regular basis. An estimated 470,000 people have died since the start of the conflict and there are currently 13.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria and over 5 million IDPs, whilst most of the refugees are hosted in neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. The humanitarian needs of people caught up in this tragic war are increasingly critical, particularly in relation to food, health care, education and shelter.

In his Easter message this year Pope Francis called for a swift end to the carnage in Syria and for respect for international humanitarian law so that aid can be delivered to those in need. Peace in Syria is the most urgent need of all, and Caritas welcomes the Brussels Conference's emphasis on the need for political solutions to the crisis. We believe Syrian people, including women, must be at the forefront of efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and to start the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Donors and host countries have been generous in supporting those caught up in the conflict, but as the crisis continues, limitations on donor funding, together with a breakdown of the economy inside Syria and growing economic challenges in neighbouring host countries, mean that an increasing number of people are left without necessary and vital support. Thousands of people have been left behind and Syrian children, as refugees or displaced inside the country are missing out on development milestones and investments in their future. We welcome the second 'Brussels conference' and call on participants to address the funding gap which means that urgent basic needs of all people affected by the conflict are currently not being met.

Caritas member organisations are present in every country affected by the Syrian crisis, working to support internally displaced people within Syria, refugees in the neighbouring countries, and the communities who are so generously hosting them. We are working with people affected by the crisis to provide support across a range of sectors, including health, education, WASH, protection, shelter, livelihoods, social cohesion as well as job creation.

Caritas welcomes the joint NGO paper *From Promise to Practice*<sup>1</sup> which has been signed by 39 organisations, including 3 Caritas agencies (Caritas Lebanon, CAFOD and Caritas Switzerland). We particularly welcome the increased focus on sustainable and decent solutions for refugees, recognising that the present situation is unbearable and that a combination of resettlement, future safe return, education as well as options for self-reliance and access to labour market need to be explored.

However, the most urgent need is for all parties to the conflict, supported by the international community is, to find ways to bring about a peaceful negotiated end to the armed conflict, and Caritas welcomes the Brussels Conference's emphasis on the need for political solutions to the crisis. We believe Syrian people, with a special emphasis on children and women, must be at the forefront of efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and to start the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding.



## Protection

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The protection of civilians remains a critical need. A recent report<sup>2</sup> on sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in the Syrian Arab Republic noted that levels of sexual violence including sexualised torture and cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment is a significant feature of the conflict. It affects women, girls, boys and men both directly and indirectly. Specialised long-term SGBV response and mental health and psychosocial support services are key but they are currently inadequately funded. These services are crucial investments for the future of families and individuals, contributing to collective community resilience.

In Lebanon, Caritas social workers and legal advisors have recorded an increase in exploitation of Syrian refugees, with an increase in protection cases identified through outreach, referrals and walk-ins in its 15 centres across 6 governorates. Cases include child protection, SGBV, and evictions which increased in the Beqaa valley during 2017. Despite the generosity of the Lebanese Government in hosting an estimated 1.5 million Syrians in the country, there are major legal challenges facing refugees in Lebanon. Tighter regulations including border regulation, residency renewal and lack of legal status limits access to services and increases vulnerability to abuse, including labour and sexual exploitation without recourse to the legal system.

## Education

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Across the region there are an estimated 6.1 million children in need of education. Inside Syria the destruction of school buildings and the loss of teachers and other staff, as well as the high insecurity in many areas means that school attendance has plummeted. In Jordan and Lebanon only half of the estimated 700,000 Syrian school age children are attending school. This is both an education and protection challenge as many families cannot afford to send their children to school, trying to send them out to work instead. Many children have missed months, even years of schooling, and the differences in curricula in hosting countries add to the challenges for refugee children. Caritas is providing holistic schooling for refugee

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<sup>1</sup> <http://jordaningoforum.org/2018/03/19/promise-to-practice-joint-ngo-regional-report-for-brussels-conference-2018/>

<sup>2</sup> "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic. Conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, UN Human Rights Council, March 2018

children wherever possible across Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey as well as Egypt, with an approach which tackles not just the educational needs of students, but also their psycho-social needs.

## Livelihoods

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The ability of refugees and displaced people to find work and support their families is fundamental not only to their physical welfare but also to their sense of dignity, wellbeing and self-worth. Yet, in all 3 neighbouring refugee hosting countries – Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey – legal impediments, as well as lack of available jobs mean that only a tiny fraction have access to paid full-time and secure employment.

In Jordan, refugees are restricted to the construction, agriculture and cleaning sectors. Home working is not permitted, and most skilled professionals are not allowed to practice their profession. Work permits are overwhelmingly issued to men, with only 5% of women granted permits during 2017.

Funding for livelihoods work is even more precarious than for social cohesion, with only 33% funding received in Lebanon<sup>3</sup> whilst in Jordan although the resilience component is 50% funded, the refugee component is a mere 18% funded<sup>4</sup>.

*Caritas is deeply concerned about this situation. If people are prevented from earning a livelihood, cannot depend on adequate and sustained humanitarian assistance and cannot return to their homes to rebuild their lives or hope for relocation/ resettlement in a third country, what options are left for them?*

## Social cohesion and social stability

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Over the 12 months since the 2017 Brussels Conference, as civil society organisations working at the community level, we have seen steadily growing pressures on local resources in Syria neighbouring countries, contributing to an increased potential for intercommunity tension. This is particularly the case in Lebanon where, according to the end of year UNDP Perception Survey<sup>5</sup>, over a third of the population identify competition for services as a source of intercommunity tension, an increase of 12% over the previous quarter, and 85% of people surveyed feel that vulnerable Lebanese have been neglected by international assistance. Reflecting this, findings of another survey indicated that 90% of respondents agreed that the presence of so many Syrian refugees is placing too much strain on Lebanon's resources, such as water and electricity. Finally, only 3% of the respondents reported that there are 'no tensions' between Lebanese and Syrians in their areas<sup>6</sup>. According to a recent study<sup>7</sup>, 27 per cent of urban refugees living in Jordan reported experiencing fear, all or most of the time in the two weeks preceding the interview. Furthermore, 35 per cent of urban refugees reported reduced functioning in their daily activities due to emotional distress. Multiple reasons were cited as triggers to these symptoms of distress, varying between communities. For Syrians, family tensions were recorded as the biggest issue by both men and women, in addition to financial struggles and discrimination.

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<sup>3</sup> Livelihoods end of year Dashboard, figures as of end of July 2017

<sup>4</sup> Livelihoods Sector Quarterly Report (October 2017-December 2017) Inter-sectors working Group, Jordan

<sup>5</sup> ARK-UNDP Perception Surveys

<sup>6</sup> 2017 Stabilisation Survey

<sup>7</sup> International Medical Corps (IMC) 2017

## Caritas Lebanon Education Project

For the third year, Caritas Lebanon is providing quality education and holistic support services to vulnerable children and their families, enabling students to succeed in school and become more resilient and resourceful members of their communities and consolidating partnerships with semi-private and private schools in localities where no alternatives are available. These partnerships strengthen entire school communities, the impact of which will be observable beyond the programme's lifetime and build on the increased trust and involvement of caregivers, which is instrumental in creating supportive environments for learning and development, both at home and at school.

## Durable solutions

Caritas signatories to this paper welcome the current focus on the need to identify durable solutions for refugees and displaced persons, including sustainable, decent and forward looking conditions in hosting countries, resettlement in other countries or, when conditions permit inside Syria, safe return.

At the same time, we urge humanitarian actors to find ways to enhance protection and to create opportunities to build a decent life for 5 million of IDPs that are currently living in Syria under insecure and precarious conditions, often far from their region of origin.



As Caritas agencies we see the tremendous suffering of the refugees who on a daily basis experience insecurity and fear of arrest because of legal issues relating to their stay, lack of ability to find decent work to meet even their most basic needs and face discrimination and tensions with their host community neighbours. The daily precariousness of their lives means that an increasing number of refugees are now feeling more and more despondent about their chances of finding lasting sanctuary and integration in the neighbouring countries (particularly Jordan and Lebanon). They are considering alternative solutions such as resettlement in third countries, or even, in desperation, return to Syria. Nevertheless, despite these push factors, without a political settlement to the conflict in Syria which would ensure their protection and access to decent living conditions and the ability to support themselves, return to Syria is currently neither durable nor safe and indeed risks generating another cycle of displacement<sup>8</sup>.



Within the framework of achieving durable solutions to the huge displacement crisis generated by the war in Syria, we believe that donors at the Brussels conference should now seriously re-consider their positions on resettlement of refugees. Despite the fact that the 2017 Brussels conference recognised that resettlement

<sup>8</sup> In 2017 for every Syrian (refugee or internally displaced) who returned home, there were 3 newly displaced, according to *Dangerous Ground* a report issued by 6 NGOs in February 2018 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/dangerous-ground-syria-s-refugees-face-uncertain-future>

has a critical role 'together with other legal pathways', to offer 'safe and dignified access to safety beyond the immediate region' the international community has failed to honour resettlement promises and as a result has left the burden of care with the current neighbouring host countries. This must be seriously addressed during the remainder of 2018. As the situation continues to deteriorate politically, militarily and diplomatically, it is unlikely that significant numbers of people will be able to return safely to their former homes in Syria in the immediate future. Therefore, there is an even greater responsibility on the international community to honour the moral obligation to significantly increase the numbers of people they welcome.

We join the signatories of *Promise to Practice* in calling for participants at the Brussels Conference to commit to permit entry or resettle 10% of the Syrian refugees currently residing in neighbouring countries.

### **Caritas Jordan Livelihoods Project**

The 18-month Solid Waste and Positive Energy project started in July 2016 with funding from the German Government and Caritas Switzerland. It covers 9 municipalities in 3 governorates and provides temporary employment for 2,800 people, 50% Syrian refugees and 50% vulnerable Jordanians.

All workers signed a temporarily contract with the municipalities, and all of them were covered by Social Security and the Syrians were issued work permits. An orientation session at the start of the project provided 1,200 workers (numbers of workers that time), information covering issues such as Social Security, daily wages labour law and work permit regulations for the Syrians. The fact that project participants received a wage for their labour enabled them to meet their basic family needs and contributed towards social cohesion as the Jordanians and Syrians beneficiaries were working together in one site with no conflicts.

### **Caritas recommendations**

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- We call on the international community to redouble efforts to find immediate peaceful political solutions to end the conflict and avoid further suffering and destruction;
- Donors need to recognise and immediately address the serious funding shortfalls that exist in all sectors and the impact these gaps have on current programming, particularly in health, education, protection, livelihoods, shelter and social cohesion;
- Being widely recognized as a protracted crises, donors should commit to multi-year flexible funding in order to meet medium and long term needs;
- Vulnerable people affected by the crisis need to be specifically prioritized. Their basic needs must be mainstreamed and protection should be assured;
- Donors should focus on durable solutions to support Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, especially in specific regard to the right to work, access to education, health and broader livelihoods support;
- Member States must honour commitments made to resettle a fair-share of refugees currently living in countries neighbouring Syria.