# Report of the Regional Workshop on Communications with Persons of Concern

25 March 2014
Kempinski Hotel, Amman, Jordan

## Introduction & Overview

The Regional Workshop on Communications with Persons of Concern in the Syrian Refugee Response took place in Amman on 25 March 2014 and brought together over 60 participants from 25 NGOs and seven UN Agencies from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.

The aims of the workshop were to:

• build cooperation among humanitarian actors involved in communicating with refugees and host communities within the Syrian Refugee Response;
• take stock of progress, achievements, challenges and remaining gaps;
• introduce media development actors and discuss ways we can collaborate; and
• share good practices regarding innovative tools and approaches.

Some of the recurring themes and key challenges highlighted by participants included:

• the need for better data about refugees' media habits and communications needs;
• the need for better coordination of communications message among agencies in the Syria response, including better and earlier discussions on communications in the programme/policy development cycle;
• the need for innovative responses to the information needs of the non-camp caseload and the challenge of maintaining community relations; and
• the need for innovative responses to the challenges posed by the increased use of targeted assistance.

While a great deal more work needs to be done, in most of the areas progress is being made to address the gaps and challenges, for example:

• assessments of refugees' communications needs in planning for Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan;
• information-sharing platforms and model SOPs have been produced at the regional level;
• web and mobile applications in development for community outreach and feedback; and
• consolidated complaints mechanisms and procedures being trialed for camps in Iraq.

More information on the issues, challenges, and responses proposed by workshop participants follow in this report, including links to presentations and other relevant information.

## Session 1: Regional & Country Overviews

The first session of the workshop opened with a welcome by the Head of the UNHCR MENA Protection Service, then followed regional and country level presentations.

### Regional
UNHCR's vision for communications with persons of concern was outlined: "Syrian refugees are informed about services and assistance provided by organizations and are included in decisions that affect their lives through two-way communication".

It was noted that over the past year the UNHCR MENA Director's Office in Amman has operationalized this vision in four phases:

- Assessing needs and capacity: obtaining an understanding of the profile of Syrian refugees, their information needs, as well as the response resources available in the field;
- Supporting Operations: deploying support to several operations (Za'atari, Lebanon, North Iraq); and
- Strengthening capacity: developing tools and training for non-communication staff of UNHCR and partners working with refugees in the field (Mass Information Toolkit).

The office is now moving into a new phase of strengthening coordination and information sharing, which has seen it develop:

- efforts to mainstream communications with persons of concern into Terms of Reference (ToR) of Sector Working Groups (SWGs), so that projects contain a communication with communities component from the planning stage;
- a template for Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on communicating with persons of concern has been drafted and shared with Inter-Agency Coordinators. The SOPs can be adapted to specific contexts;
- a "Communication with Communities" document type for the inter-agency data portal so that organizations can upload and share best practices and materials;
- a 4W spreadsheet to collect and disseminate information on existing and pending projects aimed at communicating with persons of concern in the region; and
- the concept and implementation of this Communications with Persons of Concern Workshop.

### Egypt

There are a number of challenges in Egypt, the greatest of which is to reach the Syrian refugee population, which is scattered mostly in rural areas, and about 40 per cent of the population is in three main urban areas (Alexandria, Damietta and Greater Cairo).

The following were flagged as currently employed means of communicating with refugees in Egypt: videos and posters at UNHCR registration centers; information disseminated through mobile registration activities carried out in remote areas two or three times a week; mass SMS systems managed by registration and media officers; a 24/7 hotline; community centers where focus discussions are held with refugees; Community-Based Protection Networks run by community leaders and refugees; regular field visits; Facebook page; and an information portal for refugees (in development).

UNHCR Egypt has been trying to enhance community outreach and awareness raising activities and has also been providing information to media actors for distribution. Furthermore, despite challenges of accessing refugees in border entry points (such as airports) the organization has been able – on an informal basis – to disseminate some information at these locations.

An assessment on the information needs of refugees has indicated that the main subjects they ask about are related to residency and administrative procedures, possible consequences related to the invalidation of the residency extension and onward movements to third countries, and resettlement. UNHCR Egypt highlighted the need to ensure that communication with persons of concern is incorporated from the planning stage of projects, not only as a responsive measure.  Also, with so many organizations active in the response, messages need to be harmonized, so that refugees are communicated with using one voice.

## Iraq

[The presentation from Iraq](#) noted that community communication activities vary greatly in camp and non-camp settings across the KRI. In camps in the Erbil province, ACTED (which is responsible for camp management in Kawergosk and Darashakran) uses community mobilizers, bulk SMS system, and printed materials. A Public Address system is available in all camps in the Erbil province but Qushtapa. However, it has never been used so far, pending standard operating procedures from UNHCR. In addition, another partner, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is planning a series of similar activities in Qushtapa and Basirma camps.

Refugee councils in Erbil Governorate are very important for the dissemination of information, and refugee councils and community mobilizers also seem to be the preferred method of communication in Arbat camp in Suleymaniyha Governorate. The Protection Assistance Reintegration Centre (PARC) is the main point of contact between UNHCR and the refugee communities living in urban areas. In Erbil's PARC, very little information is available for the refugees in the form of printed materials such as leaflets and posters. The PARC in Suleymaniyha has made more progress in terms of mass information opportunities for the refugees, including through banners and information desks.

In the Dohuk governorate, the refugee community plays an important role on establishing communication channels. With more than 250 refugees elected, the community brings several issues to the humanitarian community's attention. There are information points in some camps, and organizations such as Un Pont Per and International Rescue Committee use several communication tools in the camps, such as orientation guides, PA systems, information boards, and community mobilizers. WFP has also established an info-line for complaints on food-related issues.

There are a large number of organizations working in the camps and thus a risk of overlap and message incoherence. In spite of the preferred method of receiving information (through face to face communication), refugees are also increasingly requesting to have things in writing, as proof. This reflects what participants noted was a lack of trust among some of the refugees in the information that they receive, even information from official sources. In this regard, one of the priorities is to develop printed materials and set up complaint mechanisms, as well as advocate with sectors to include mass information in their discussions.

## Jordan

In Jordan, media attention has focused in Za'atari camp, where an estimated 100,000 refugee are hosted. However, as more than 80 per cent of the refugee population lives outside camps, the operation faces a great challenge to reach out-of-camp beneficiaries.

In order to understand the information needs and gaps of Syrian refugees in Jordan, a survey will be carried out and an Arabic-language portal compiling information on services will also be developed. The survey will be carried out by REACH in Za'atari and by volunteer university students in out-of-camp settings. Lebanon and Iraq are also in the planning stages of similar surveys, which should allow a regional picture to be built up.

Currently, communication with refugees is conducted through bulk text messages, although experience has shown that this might not be the most efficient method, as refugees change SIM cards quite frequently. Notwithstanding, SIM cards are being given to refugees in Za'atari camp as part of the verification process underway. Two-way communication is established via the UNHCR toll-free hotline.

Communication with persons of concern, which included both refugees and host communities, is also done through town hall meetings. It has been a successful project that will be continued throughout 2014.

An interesting joint initiative is under discussion between Jordan and Lebanon UNHCR offices to develop a smartphone application that would provide information on services available in the surrounding area, and also allow POCs to record their needs and access complaint mechanisms. UNHCR Jordan is also working on an Arabic Portal: "Talking with Refugees", which will go live on the 1st of June to lend a voice to refugee communities in Jordan and provide relevant information.

Another important project is the radio project developed by UNESCO and Un Pont Per (UPP) targeting refugees and host communities. The radio program provides information on services and on-air discussions on issues of importance to refugees and host communities. Syrian refugees are also trained on doing reporting and presenting.

**Lebanon**
The one million refugees dispersed throughout the country, combined with the different level of trust that refugees have in humanitarian actors, is proving to be the greatest challenge for Lebanon.

To meet these challenges, there are currently several projects and methods aimed at informing Syrian refugees underway and in planning.  Mass SMS systems reach approximately 70 per cent of the registered refugees, although this tool has some challenges including its cost and the fact that some refugees do not have or share a phone number and others changing their numbers regularly. Videos developed by BBC Media Action are being screened in registration centers and are pending display in municipalities, community and health centers in order to reach refugees who have already gone through the registration process.  There are numerous brochures and leaflets put out by humanitarian actors, which has the potential to lead to information overload and uncoordinated messaging.

There are a large number of helplines operated by different agencies and in different parts of the country and UNHCR is currently exploring the establishment of an integrated info-line linked to a comprehensive interagency Q&A on services and assistance available in Lebanon (INQAL).

Other initiatives include the production of more videos, partnerships with local TV stations for broadcasting TV spots focusing on social cohesion (the editorial team would include refugees), a radio programme in partnership with UNESCO, and a web portal providing information for refugees. Participants discussed the challenge of reaching such a diverse and geographically dispersed refugee population, which requires a coordinated approach by all humanitarian actors.  Harmonizing and systematizing existing information is important to avoid overlap of projects, especially since social services are stretched and there are increased tensions between refugees and the local population.

## Session 2: Case Studies

This session was designed to introduce media development agencies and communications networks, and to create awareness of innovative approaches to communication with affected communities.

**CDAC Network**
Background was provided on the establishment of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network, and its support to members on setting up effective two-way communications with disaster-affected communities.

As an example, when typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines, the CDAC Network helped by providing virtual coordination in the form of a Skype group, resource sharing through a Dropbox account and providing briefs for longer documents.

Possible support from the CDAC Network in the Syrian refugee Response was discussed, including the idea of establishing country-level Communication with Communities Working Groups in Jordan and Lebanon.

However, participants expressed concern at creating another forum, which would mean more meetings and parallel discussions. CDAC Network also has support it can potentially provide in the form of secretariat support in emergencies, access to a roster of humanitarian communication experts, capacity strengthening, developing and translating key messages, and drafting guidelines and sharing lessons learned from previous emergencies.

**BBC Media Action**
The BBC Media Action Presentation noted that after a fact finding mission in 2013, where it held discussions with UNHCR and other humanitarian partners, it proceeded to develop videos targeting Syrian refugees. The result was a 50-minute-long video information loop for newly arrived refugees, which aims to communicate the most complex messages previously flagged and discussed by humanitarian actors. The video was filmed in locations in Lebanon and Jordan using actors and refugees, as well as animations and illustrations from the Mass Information Toolkit.

It is currently played on a loop on screens at seven refugee registration centers in Jordan and Lebanon, reaching 175,000 people a month. There are plans to project the film more widely in community centers and other places where refugees gather.

Maha Taki, Projects Manager, Middle East and North Africa showed clips from the longer video and reported that refugees had found the videos motivating in asking for help and had requested further information on country-specific issues.

**AptART**
Awareness & Prevention Through Art (AptART) is an NGO that aims to provide vulnerable children with an opportunity to express themselves, as well as an outlet to build awareness and promote prevention about the issues that affect their lives.

A presentation was made of photos of street art, which AptART has helped children Za'atari to create. Projects involve conversations with children, which are then converted into artistic street art (murals, wheelbarrows, etc.) bearing messages that are relevant to their communities. The presentation also showcased a video produced regarding the project.

## Session 3: Challenges & Responses

The workshop participants identified six key challenges related to Communications with Persons of Concern in the region, and then broke into small groups to discuss those challenges in detail. The groups reported back in plenary on the challenges/issues as well as the potential solutions or ideas to address those challenges.

### Communicating with Non-Camp Refugees and Host Communities

Context & Challenges:
- More than 80 per cent of the registered refugees in the region are living in a non-camp setting, with the figure ranging from 100 per cent in Lebanon and Egypt, to 82 per cent in Jordan, and around 65 per cent in Turkey and Iraq. This makes traditional camp based outreach and mass information campaigns redundant, and requires innovative responses.

- The group reported that negative views of Syrians were prevalent across the region, including the negative stereotyping of Syrian refugees in the media, among government officials and by community leaders, was leading to tensions with host communities. There are rumours and perceptions of unequal treatment - that refugees are being favored for services and assistance over their neighbours in the host community.

- It was reported that in some places there was too much information material going around communities from different agencies, some of which offered conflicting or incorrect information.
- It was noted that in some countries there are large numbers of refugees who have not registered, including some from specific ethnic or religious groups. The group noted that, in addition to the logistical challenges associated with reaching Syrians living in the community for registration, many Syrians were not convinced that their personal information would be kept confidential if they registered and provided it to UNHCR.

- The group noted that reaching refugees who live across wide geographical areas with consistent and appropriate messaging raises logistical, technological and cost issues. It was also noted that the exact locations of many refugee families are not known, especially among mobile urban populations.

Responses:
- It was noted that Communications with Persons of Concern should not be considered separately from Media and PI activities. Long-term relationships with media should be cultivated and, for example, regular roundtables could be held with journalists to help dispel myths and build trust. Better understanding of which media refugees trust will also help in targeting interventions in this area.
- Similarly, links and outreach to community, religious and government leaders could be stepped up. In this outreach, stressing the benefits to host communities of certain humanitarian interventions (ie: community support or quick impact projects) would be beneficial.
- Interagency leaflets, campaigns and portals could be considered as a way of offering coordinated information on a single or group of topics. Ensuring communications are considered in the early stages of programme development (ie: discussion in Sector Working Group) would assist here.
- Clearer information is needed on registration procedures and the role of UNHCR, including the measures that are in place for the protection of privacy and personal information. Information on the benefits of registration, services available for registered refugees, and dangers of not registering is also useful. Capacitating staff and partners dealing directly with refugees to deliver these messages is important.
- More research on the localities in which refugees are residing, mapping of population densities and other targeting mechanisms would be useful. Links with religious and community leaders can help to identified localities with high refugee concentrations. Toll-free numbers for information and help lines and transport subsidies could also be considered to help link scattered refugees with central information points.

## Communications Challenges Associated with Targeted Assistance

Context & Challenges:
- Many programmes responding to the Syria refugee crisis are severely underfunded and are not able to meet the full needs of all beneficiaries with the amount of income available to them. Many programmes are therefore turning to targeting mechanisms to identify and deliver assistance only to the most vulnerable in a given population. This creates communication challenges in in terms of notifying beneficiaries of eligibility status, taking complaints/appeals from those excluded, and managing potential community hostility about the policies.

- The group discussed, in particular, the case of Lebanon which is in the process of enacting a targeted assistance policy.

- The group reported that there appeared to be a lack of coordination among agencies when it came to messaging about targeted assistance. It was flagged that this went beyond coordinating messaging but also spoke to an overall lack of clarity on the programmes' actual objectives and modalities.

• It was also noted that messages can often be developed too late to be effectively disseminated to refugees or to the front-line workers who have to deliver them, and are sometimes found to be inappropriate for the audience once they are delivered.

Responses:
• Where possible, the targeting criteria and assistance delivered should be as harmonized as possible for programming being undertaken in the same area. This will help the messaging to beneficiaries about those programmes to also be as harmonized and consistent as possible.

• It would also be beneficial to involve communications specialists in discussions on programme development earlier in the process (ie: discussion in Sector Working Group) so there is a good understanding of what aims and modalities of the programme need to be communicated. This would also help to ensure that messages (ideally, having been focus-tested with the target audience) and distribution/feedback channels (including Q&A for front-line workers) are ready by the time the programme starts.

## Establishing Help Lines & Information Lines

Context & Challenges:
• Helplines and information lines are an important part of two-way communications with persons of concern, enabling them not only receive important information about their status, benefits and services available, but also to provide feedback on those services. With more than 150 agencies participating in Syria Regional Response, the technological and resource challenges of establishing helplines are coupled in this context with coordination challenges.

• It was also noted that in some places there are a variety of parallel systems (for example there are 13 hotlines in Lebanon) covering specific geographical areas and/or areas of service delivery. There is also a challenge of linking general information lines with assistance lines (ie: legal counseling) to ensure that appropriate individual advice and responses are available for those who need it.

• In addition, services provided can change over time, with some local organizations outside the formal Syria response being difficult to find and acquire information from. Some hotlines are overloaded while some do not function at all as the service or provider has ceased to operate or changed its number/location.

Responses:
• Potential innovative responses discussed by the group included the use of IT platforms that draw 'live' data and information from websites to form the basis of Q&As for call centre staff.
• Also discussed was the potential of software that links hotline Q&A databases to mobile applications used by field staff to update information 'on the go'.
• Finally, it was proposed that countries could consider establishing one single toll-free hotline number that directs calls to different call centres/agency staff depending on the information required or service in question.

## Complaint & Feedback Mechanisms:

Context & Challenges:
• Two-way communication is vital to ensure that communities are not just passive recipients of the messaging of agencies, but also active participants in the dialogue with those agencies on vital issues affecting their lives.

- There are a plethora of humanitarian actors working on the Syria response, and a wide variety of feedback and complaint mechanisms exist for the different agencies, sectors and countries across the region.  This can lead to confusion and frustration for persons of concern and inefficiency in agencies' response to feedback.
- From a protection standpoint, the group flagged the challenge of distinguishing between protection related issues and general feedback on services - clarifying follow up procedures for complaints that are actionable was a related point discussed.  Following-up from a systemic/programmatic point of view (ie: changing programme modalities if required) was considered as important as following up individual cases and grievances.

Responses:
- It was considered that a centralized, interagency complaints system could be considered in certain circumstances.  It was noted that ACTED was implementing a complaints mechanism as part of its camp management function in several camps in Iraq.
- It was noted that the involvement of communications, field, community services, protection and programme colleagues at early stages of the planning of complaints mechanisms is vital, to ensure that the feedback loop is being fully engaged.

## Coordination and Information Management

Context & Challenges
- Whether consciously or not, the more than 150 agencies involved in the RRP6 response have some role in communicating with persons of concern.  Most country's refugee response structures do not have a specific working group on communications with persons of concern.

- The group reported that the large number of actors led logically and somewhat inevitably to large numbers of overlapping messages and challenges of coordination.  Agencies also feel that attempts to coordinate often lead to meeting fatigue rather than better outcomes and strategic direction.

Responses:
- It was noted that the existing Data Portal was a useful information sharing and coordination tool which could be better utilized by those involved in communications with persons of concern.

- The group also discussed the value of communications with persons of concern being discussed earlier during policy/programme development, so that any associated messaging can be coordinated. In this respect, it was recalled that the model SOPs are a useful tool for working groups to start thinking about communications issues.

- The mobile application being developed jointly in Jordan and Lebanon could also be a tool for better coordination and information management, bringing together as it does information on needs, available services, and feedback mechanisms.

- The CDAC presentation earlier in the day was recalled, noting that there was experience and expertise available in such umbrella groups and their involvement in the Syria response could be further discussed.

## Communications with People with Specific Needs

Context & Challenges
Persons with specific needs often don't get the targeted and relevant information that they require, either because they cannot physically reach information points or because the information is not provided in a suitable form.

Assessments have also found that people with visual impairments receive less information than others. It was also noted that just because one person in a family was reached with information, it doesn't mean that all members have received or understand the message.

Responses:

- The group noted that mainstream mass communication needs to be inclusive - people with specific needs shouldn't always be treated as a different category, but different modalities may need to be employed to ensure they are reached.

- One-to-one communications with persons with specific needs is important, so staff should be capacitated to directly relay information in a way that will be understood. Mobile information provision and outreach is very important in this respect, particularly as less mobile people will be excluded when information is disseminated at static points.

Report prepared by the Meeting Secretariat
UNHCR MENA Director's Office, Amman
April 2014

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