

## Participatory Assessment Report Jordan 2020 - Summary

### Overview

Since the beginning of its operation in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, UNHCR has conducted participatory assessment exercises in order to deepen its understanding of the protection risks faced by persons of concern across the country. Guided by UNHCR's principle of age, gender and diversity (AGD), participatory assessments help ensure that refugees<sup>1</sup> are at the centre of decision-making concerning their protection and well-being. During these assessments, UNHCR and partners, together with persons of concern, analyse protection risks faced by refugees, learn about local capacities and listen to their proposed solutions. The results of these assessments are then used to inform the protection response. Although participatory assessments are generally conducted through structured dialogue with girls, boys, women, and men in the form of in-person focus group discussions and key informant interviews, this year, this was not possible given the unprecedented public health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup> that has affected countless communities, families and individuals. Operating under the humanitarian principle of "do no harm", that is, avoiding any negative impact of its actions on affected populations, UNHCR decided to replace the onsite field research generally used in such assessments with a desk review of the various discussions and feedback gathered from persons of concern in 2020.

Currently hosting over 750,000 refugees, Jordan has a strong tradition of generosity towards refugees from neighbouring countries and beyond. UNHCR coordinates the refugee response in support of the Government of Jordan (GoJ) and in partnership with 16 NGO and GoJ partners, and promotes a One-Refugee Approach for all persons of concern, seeking to reduce and ultimately eliminate differences in rights and access to services based on nationality in the overall refugee response to protection and assistance needs. Despite various positive developments on the policy and response front, including enhanced access to education for all and to livelihoods opportunities for Syrian refugees, more efforts are needed to address child protection and GBV concerns, as well as the challenges refugees continue to face as funding decreases and assets are depleted.

### Methodology

Together with enhanced scrutiny in refugee camps and targeted interventions, a core part of UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been listening and communicating with persons of concern in order to better understand their situation and respond to their needs. Notably, between January and September 2020, over 19,611 refugees engaged with UNHCR through multiple outreach methods, including nine focus group discussions, six information sessions, three remote survey, one remote meeting between refugee community leaders and UNHCR Representative, community-led initiatives and Community Support Centres and Committees (CSCs) meetings, targeted visits, communication through UNHCR's hotlines, Integrated Voice Recognition (IVR) Helpline, e-mail, WhatsApp trees, Help website, social media and others. The use of diverse communication channels is important within the Jordanian context to reach multiple refugee groups, as they face different protection risks and challenges depending on their country of origin, socio-economic background, and location in Jordan. These communications assisted UNHCR in tacking stock of the issues faced by persons of concern and were utilised to develop this year's participatory assessment, with the necessary safeguards in place to ensure confidentiality and the safety of communities.

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'refugee' and 'persons of concern' are used in this report to refer to recognized refugees and asylum-seekers, unless otherwise specified if experiences between them differ.

<sup>2</sup> On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, and a pandemic on 11 March.

## Impact of COVID-19 on refugees

Since the start of the pandemic, the GoJ has taken strict measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and has commendably included refugees in the National Health Response Plan. Jordan's strict lockdown and curfew measures ended in mid-June, but partial mobility restrictions were re-introduced in October to address a surge in infections. The outbreak and the response measures have had dramatic effects on the lives of both refugees and host communities, with the economic impact of the pandemic leaving many people unemployed, indebted and at risk of eviction, pushing them deeper into poverty. The situation is particularly dire among refugees, considering that many of them are employed in the informal sector or as daily workers with limited access to safety nets and social protection programmes, and many faced additional challenges to access employment opportunities due to mobility restrictions, while there have also been reports of increased child labour, as well as a spike of child marriages among refugee families. Moreover, the pandemic also had adverse effects on school-aged children, on persons with disabilities and the elderly, as well as on refugees' mental health.

## Summary of findings

While many of the issues identified by refugees in this report relate to the specific challenges that they continue to face, this year, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many issues pre-date the outbreak and some have been exacerbated by it.

- **Self-reliance, access to livelihoods, cash assistance:** Refugees struggled to find work and meet their needs prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, but the pandemic has significantly worsened their financial situation and self-reliance, with loss of livelihoods identified as a major concern for the majority of refugees. Surveys that took place in May indicated that 92% of refugees had less than JOD 50 of savings left, while by June, 40% of refugees had debts of more than JOD 100 per capita. Financial assistance to cover essential basic needs, pay back accumulated debts and overdue rent was one of the most recurrent needs expressed by refugees. In May, only 4% of refugees surveyed were able to meet all their basic needs, and 51% were able to meet less than half. As vulnerabilities increased, negative coping mechanisms, including cases of child labour and child marriages, have been reported.
- **Registration and access to documentation:** The renewal of UNHCR-issued Asylum-Seeker Certificates and Government-issued Ministry of Interior (MOI) cards was also one of the main concerns expressed by refugees, despite the Government of Jordan's (GoJ) decision of considering them valid until the end of 2020. While in general refugees have been able to access Government services, others continue to face issues in accessing services (including health and education), as some Government institutions are not accepting their expired documents or documents that have not been updated (i.e. adding new-borns).
- **Mental health, GBV & child protection:** Lack of food and income, fear of eviction, and fear of contracting COVID-19 increased feelings of anxiety and stress among refugees. This situation, coupled with the disruption of social and protective networks, and decreased access to services, led to increased domestic and intimate partner violence cases within refugee families. The number of refugees threatening to commit suicide has also increased.
- **Social cohesion:** On a positive note, refugees stated that their relations with host communities have improved during the pandemic and noted increased solidarity between them and the host community and among refugee groups themselves.
- **Education:** Non-Syrian refugees face multiple challenges in accessing education in Jordan, while for many Syrian and non-Syrian families, the cost of tuition fees, supplies and transportation remains a challenge. Refugees also noted COVID-19 specific challenges, including poor or lack of connectivity (with an estimated 23% of Syrian refugees having no internet access at home), lack of or insufficient number of devices, lack of interactive educational platforms either online or televised, lack of parents' capacity to support children's learning at home.

- **Health:** With primary healthcare services paused for almost six weeks in the early months of the crisis, followed by subsequent mobility restrictions, refugees reported challenges in accessing public health clinics and accessing or obtaining their medication.
- **Other challenges** identified by refugees include limited accessibility to UNHCR services due to the pandemic; challenges in reaching out to UNHCR through the helpline as lines are often busy; food insecurity; limited or lack of access to services such as health care and quality education; insufficient resettlement and complementary pathways opportunities; limited services available to persons with disabilities and older refugees; fear of contracting COVID-19; and others. Non-Syrian refugees have also expressed frustration with humanitarian actors as many interventions target mostly Syrians.

## Recommendations

Persons of concern identified and made a number of recommendations to UNHCR, including improving communication with refugees; improving access to services and partially reopening premises for in-person services to the most vulnerable; promoting access to livelihoods opportunities through provision of vocational trainings and job placement programmes, advocacy for opening of factories near camps and equal geographical distribution of livelihood opportunities, support of refugees who are freelancing, provision of child-care solutions for mothers; strengthening of education services; strengthening of communication related to healthcare services; registration for Syrians and non-Syrians alike; and improving communication related to resettlement services and complementary pathways.

In parallel, a number of recommendations were made by UNHCR, focusing on increasing advocacy and coordination with authorities on issues related to non-Syrian refugees, including registration, access to the formal labour market and access to education and related fees. UNHCR also recommended increasing advocacy with donors to provide additional financial assistance to vulnerable refugees and expand scholarship opportunities. Other recommendations included increasing awareness of refugees on issues including eligibility of assistance and funding mechanisms, and sensitisation on the importance of formal employment and going to school. Strengthening remote protection monitoring activities and coordination between education, child protection, community-based protection, and gender-based violence units to ensure better protection of children and youth were also key recommendations.