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Refugee livelihoods in Egypt and Lebanon

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The area of refugee economies is attracting increased attention, both from the perspective of humanitarian organisations and in relation to national or international migration policies. Such economies present a number of unique characteristics compared to economies for nationals of the host countries, notably limitations on rights, transnationality, uncertain time-frames, informality, and initial loss of financial, social and cultural capital. This paper presents findings from interviews with Syrian refugees living situations of precariousness in urban contexts in Egypt and Lebanon. The study aims to gain insights into how these refugees try to make ends meet, from the perspective of the concerned individuals themselves. Light can thereby be shed on aspects that play a role for the refugees' ability to look ahead and rebuild lives, as well as on events and circumstances that can lead to major crises. Thus interview questions did not only concern sources of income, but also obligations towards dependents, the influence of place and mobility, and effects of unexpected events such as illness and inability to work. Beyond conventional relief efforts, gaining a more detailed picture of constraints, resources and risks encountered by refugees as well as of the meaning differing circumstances have for the concerned individuals may serve as a basis for developing more organised and collective responses to ensure social security in conditions of forced displacement and migration.

Syrian refugees live very diverse situations, depending on access to social, financial and educational capital, as well as on their religion. Nevertheless, findings suggest that macro-scales policies have driven a large proportion of the interviewed Syrians into informality, and into situations of great personal insecurity. Particularly in Lebanon, policies primarily aim to restrict movement, control the refugees, and avoid permanent settlement by restrictive regulations concerning work. Fear of spillover effects from the armed conflict add to existing tensions. Refugees are therefore at the mercy of landlords and employers, as well as being exposed to robbery and assault. The worst event at a personal level appeared to be any serious health problem that would require care, since they did not have the resources to pay for it. The precarious situation of these refugees may be further aggravated if international agreements decide to initiate repatriation programmes, since many do not have anywhere to go, and it is unlikely that the situation in Syria will be safe enough to return for many years to come. The Syrian community that was studied in Egypt appeared to be in a somewhat better situation. Despite restrictions on movement, lack of services, poor quality of education and poverty, Syrians had started small businesses, and functioned openly as a community. Also here, however, longer term perspectives were lacking.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, livelihoods, refugee economies, temporality, state security, human security

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