

Providing sustainable psychosocial support for Syrian refugees in Jordan REVA DHINGRA

As the Syrian refugee crisis enters a fifth year, psychosocial support for refugees has become an increasingly important priority in the relief effort in Jordan and other countries hosting Syrian refugees. This is largely due to a shift in policies by international aid organisations that increasingly consider psychosocial support to be a form of 'life-saving' aid. This article examines the expansion of psychosocial services for Syrian refugees in Jordan in the context of the evolving social and economic challenges refugees confront in situations of protracted displacement.

Smiling children lined the stage, clutching sheets of paper—diplomas that certified their graduation from a mentoring programme organised by MercyCorps and education NGO Questscope. The programme pairs Syrian refugee and Jordanian children at risk of violence and antisocial behaviour with Jordanian and Syrian mentors who serve as role models. One after the other, children stepped in front of the microphone to perform skits on violence in the classroom, to rap about racial and gender discrimination, or to simply thank their mentors for their support.

MercyCorps's programme is one of a growing number of programmes operated by organisations across Jordan aimed at providing 'psychosocial support' for the more than 646,700 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan (UNHCR 2015). With no end to the Syrian conflict in sight, psychosocial support has been increasingly emphasised as a critical service; 356,308 Syrian refugees were reported to have benefitted from psychosocial support services in 2014, as compared to a mere 5,590 in 2012 (UNHCR 2014; UNHCR 2013). This increase reflects the acknowledgement by international agencies of the potential psychological and social impacts of displacement. Yet the rapid expansion of psychosocial services in Jordan takes place in a context of changing social and economic needs of Syrian refugees who have been in Jordan for multiple years. In addressing the traumas of conflict, loss of livelihood, ruptured social networks, and diminished educational opportunities, an integrated, community-driven approach to psychosocial support is necessary for individuals suspended in the limbo of displacement.

Shifting international perspectives towards psychosocial support

Psychosocial support has only recently been promoted by international agencies as a service that, like food and shelter, is necessary for ensuring the survival and resilience of refugees and host communities (Wessels 2009). Increased research on the psychological impacts of displacement during the 1990s, coupled with crises such as the Rwandan genocide, prompted a concerted effort by international organisations to codify the importance of psychosocial and mental health services in humanitarian responses (Wessels 2009). In 2007, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee released the first global guidance on minimum mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for refugee crises (IASC 2007). It describes the centrality of psychosocial services in enhancing the resilience of individuals, families, and communities

by building on social ties through targeted programming and referring individuals for clinical psychological interventions where necessary (Meyer 2013).

Psychosocial programming in Jordan

This increased commitment to providing adequate psychosocial support has been exemplified in the expansion of psychosocial services for refugees in Jordan. At least 47 organisations provide MHPSS services to Syrian refugees (WHO and IMC, 2014). In comparison, at the height of the Iraqi refugee crisis in Jordan in 2008, an assessment of MHPSS needs found that only eight organisations were providing ‘basic’ psychosocial support and mental health services for the estimated 450,000-750,000 displaced Iraqis in Jordan (IOM 2008).

‘NGOs have learned from their history and their mistakes, especially in psychosocial support,’ noted Dua’a Al-Daraweesh, the community development team supervisor at CARE Jordan, one of the main organisations providing this type of service to refugees (Daraweesh, interview, 8 April 2015). ‘Psychosocial support is, in some cases, even more critical than cash assistance,’ she added, especially for refugees still traumatised from conflict or those waiting to be resettled who ‘simply lose hope.’

Organisations focus on addressing non-clinical psychosocial issues faced by refugees through activities and the provision of ‘safe spaces’; they refer more severe cases for mental health support and medical services.

Many of these programmes are targeted at children, who make up 52 per cent of the Syrian refugee population in Jordan. The No Lost Generation campaign, launched in 2013 to support Syrian refugee children, incorporates psychosocial support programming as a means of helping ‘overcome the psychological distress and trauma caused by the conflict, and [to reduce] the potential for replicating the hatred and violence [Syrian children] had experienced’ (NLG 2014: 2). Youth-focused programmes, such as MercyCorps’s, consist of multi-week mentoring cycles for children who are deemed ‘vulnerable’—those who are out-of-school or are survivors of domestic violence, among other considerations. Natasha Shawarib, the senior project coordinator of MercyCorps’s NLG programming, noted in an interview on 24 March 2015 that for children facing ‘profound stress,’ mentoring programmes provide the opportunity to connect with both ‘role models’ and other children to ‘help the child’s emotional and social development.’ Including vulnerable Jordanians in activities has also contributed to promoting ‘social cohesion’ by addressing the psychosocial wellbeing of host communities as well as refugees.

An imperfect solution

While the expansion of psychosocial support represents a vital step forward from the lack of attention in previous refugee crises, it takes place in a context of changing social and economic needs of Syrian refugees who have been in Jordan for two or more years. As the refugee presence continues in Jordan, the direct trauma of conflict is increasingly being replaced by traumas borne from economic pressures and ongoing alienation that is rooted in educational exclusion and lack of social cohesion.

Daraweesh notes, ‘refugees are facing a very bad financial situation in Jordan...which then affects their psychosocial wellbeing...For Syrian refugees, the main needs are related to...Jordan labour issues, the right to work.’ It is a legal requirement that all non-Jordanians have a work permit if they are to be employed. Yet obtaining a permit is financially and legally prohibitive for most refugees. For the minority of Syrians who do obtain permits, job

options are limited to a list determined by the government (Freihat 2015). Stresses that result from income insecurity and joblessness may contribute to other issues such as domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence. This behavior is often perpetrated by adult male refugees, a demographic that comprised only 31,000 of beneficiaries receiving MHPSS services (JRP 2015: 62).

As a consequence of receiving insufficient aid and confronting a high cost of living, many heads of Syrian refugee households enlist their children to earn additional income for their families. Illegal and child labour have become increasingly prevalent among Syrian refugees—this problem is intertwined with the prevalence of Syrian children who remain out of school in Jordan due to overcrowding, and financial and safety concerns. The ongoing lack of access to education (40 per cent do not go to school) and the burden of premature responsibility are key factors contributing to psychosocial stresses faced by Syrian refugee children (UNICEF 2014).

Jordanian host communities are also affected by the financial challenges created by and arising from displacement. Local populations face increased job competition and inflation, factors that have been observed to contribute to distressing tensions between groups. Syrian adolescents are particularly affected by these social rifts (UNICEF 2014).

Without addressing systemic factors such as labour laws and access to education, psychosocial support programmes provide only a temporary respite—especially as international attention and funding for Syrian refugees diminishes. The plight of Iraqi refugees in Jordan foreshadows a less-than-promising future for the Syrian refugees who are now living in the country. ‘Some Iraqis are stuck, with no resettlement plan, and they can’t engage with the local community 100 per cent because of the limitations of the work permit,’ said Daraweesh. ‘They don’t want to go back to Iraq because of the situation but they can’t live here like this. Their psychosocial needs are deeper and more critical than Syrian refugees because they simply lose hope’ (Daraweesh, interview, 8 April 2015). Instead of adjustment and improvement in psychosocial wellbeing, prolonged displacement and continued economic restrictions are contributing to increased MHPSS challenges for Syrian refugees.

Creating more holistic approaches to refugees’ well-being

The shifting struggles that refugees confront require an approach to psychosocial support that goes beyond addressing the immediate effects of violence. The IASC guidelines recognise that as refugees remain in exile from their homeland, the ‘loss of hope or perspective for the future... [and] feelings of helplessness and resignation’ are ongoing threats to psychosocial wellbeing which must be addressed in both humanitarian and developmental responses to refugee situations (IASC 2007: 169).

In Jordan, aid organisations are developing community-driven, integrative approaches for the provision of psychosocial support that seeks to address the myriad causes of psychosocial issues observed among Syrian refugees. Their intentions are to address traumas caused by conflict, loss of livelihood, ruptured social networks, and diminished educational opportunities. Organisations have employed three specific strategies to address these concerns. They have improved assessments to identify community needs; they involve Syrians as volunteers in programmes; and they include psychosocial support in educational and vocational programming.

First, by encouraging refugees to get involved in directing programmes, humanitarian and development organisations have been able to provide support that better reflects the needs of beneficiaries (Mercy Corps 2). For example, NGOs such as CARE and Collateral Repair Project responded to refugees' expressed interest in establishing a place for community members to interact outside of scheduled activities by providing spaces that are used as 'community centres' for volunteers and beneficiaries. The inclusive, needs-based approaches that these NGOs have taken enhance programme sustainability, especially in situations where funding for psychosocial support is limited, and increase refugees' sense of agency.

Second, involving Syrian refugees in mentoring and administrative positions both supports individual economic security and promotes the psychosocial wellbeing of the volunteers themselves. Despite government restrictions on work permits for Syrians, some NGOs are able to employ Syrian refugees as 'volunteers'—positions that do not require work permits—and provide stipends. Engaging in 'value-based and participatory activities' such as volunteering provides more than just financial benefits; it is cited as a key form of psychosocial support (IOM 2015: 48). Ahmad,¹¹ a mentor at a community centre operated by Questscope in Za'atari refugee camp, noted, 'The community centre is my life now,' adding that the centre enabled him to leave the isolation of his caravan to work and socialise (Ahmad, interview, 4 March 2015). Another mentor volunteer reported feeling depressed before the programme but added that he now had a 'purpose.'

Finally, organisations have increasingly worked with children and adolescents in educational and vocational programming in order to help students attain basic knowledge and skill sets for the future and to more efficiently address the challenges of discrimination and violence that children face in schools. Organisations such as Questscope include psychosocial support training for teachers within 10th grade equivalency education programmes, while Save the Children Jordan provides psychosocial support training for teachers in Jordanian schools.

Conclusion

As the Syrian displacement crisis transitions from a humanitarian emergency to a protracted refugee situation, the challenges facing Syrians and Jordanian host communities continue to evolve. Efforts by aid organisations to effectively identify needs and increase community involvement in programmes are a positive step forward to promoting sustainable support for refugee psychosocial wellbeing. Yet as the Syrian conflict persists, addressing the psychosocial impact of displacement may be impossible without systemic labour and educational policy changes.

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¹¹ Name has been changed

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