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## Giving Syrian refugees an education

By Sami Atallah

With no end in sight for the Syrian crisis, the refugee issue is a medium-term problem for Lebanon at best. Studies on refugees have shown that it takes five years for 70 percent of refugees to return home when the fighting ends. With at least 1.5 million refugees in Lebanon, the scale of the problem is unprecedented. One challenge is how to deal with provision of education to Syrian refugees.

Some of the problems are as follows: First, Syrian refugee students have little access to education. A study by the Center for Lebanese Studies shows that only 30 percent of Syrian refugees of school-going age have access to education. The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanese schools has dramatically increased from as low as 1,500 during the 2011-2012 academic year to 30,000 for the 2012-2013 academic year, while the government was expecting only 9,000 students. The sheer number the Education Ministry has to deal with makes it very difficult to provide sufficient education.

Second, the education problem is exacerbated because of the mismatch between where the Syrian refugees are settling and the number of public schools that are available. The 30,000 Syrian students are spread across Lebanon in the following way: 7 percent are in Beirut, 26 percent in Mount Lebanon, 21 percent in North Lebanon, 29 percent in Bekaa, 7.5 percent in South Lebanon and 9.5 percent in Nabatieh. In some areas, the demand greatly outnumbers the amount of places that are available in schools.

Third, the number of Syrians is very large for public schools to handle, as there are 1,280 public schools in Lebanon. Syrian refugees are distributed among nearly 800 of these schools. At Lebanese public schools, fiscal and procedural arrangements are reviewed by the Education Ministry, yet principals have the local authority to manage their own schools. The ministry also contributes at the compulsory education level by covering the fees, which amounts to the equivalent of \$100 for fees and \$40 for books. On average, the cost of providing a seat for each student varies from \$1,000 to \$3,000 annually depending on the local conditions of each school.

A fourth big problem has to do with educational level and documentation. The Syrian curriculum does not match the Lebanese one, and most students have no documents to prove which grade they are supposed to be in. This issue is connected to that of equal treatment of Lebanese and Syrian students, meaning that Syrian students could be favored at the expense of Lebanese ones in the application process for secondary education; or alternatively their rights to education might not be sufficiently upheld.

Fifth, there is rising tension among students due to their background and nationalities. Furthermore, many of the Syrian students suffer from trauma and stress due to what they have experienced at home. Most often, teachers are not equipped to handle such circumstances.

Although the Education Ministry is working closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and UNESCO, there is little coordination with local non-governmental organizations working with the schools and students. This leads to problems on the ground and frustration among the local NGOs, as they are the most aware of the particular circumstances of a certain area.

To address these problems, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies in collaboration with the Center for Lebanese Studies and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung held a discussion group with government officials, public school teachers, experts, scholars and international organization representatives. They recommended six immediate actions to improve access to education for Syrian refugees.

The government should, in coordination with the U.N. agencies, create an extensive database for Syrian refugees of school-going age, including information on their level and obtained qualifications. This will facilitate better administration, assessment of students' levels and ultimately access.

In cooperation with the U.N. agencies, extra teachers should be trained, and teachers should be assigned across Lebanon according to regional demand.

A government strategy should be further developed to address the matter of Syrian students, in accordance with all stakeholders, and with a clear vision and long-term view while taking into account the ever-changing situation. It is imperative that this strategy place emphasis on equal treatment of Syrians and Lebanese, making sure one group is not benefiting disproportionately in relation to the other.

The government's strategy should make use of the prior experience of certain successful public schools, for instance using double shifts to absorb the high number of students. The strategy could also use innovative approaches such as incorporating a mixed health and education plan, since sanitation improvements are also much needed in many schools.

There should be increased coordination with local civil society organizations. Through a centralized response organ with a comprehensive long-term vision, the local context should be taken into account and programs adapted to the environment. If schools themselves are given more authority, it will be easier for them to respond to issues particular to their own context.

A broad anti-discrimination and social cohesion building program should also be developed for the schools based on the experiences of the previous years. This could include using more social workers or counselors and more extracurricular activities geared at teamwork in the schools and should utilize the families of both the refugees and the host communities, increasing their roles. Sami Atallah is executive director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies in Beirut. He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.

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