

## MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement Middle East Sub-Regional Consultation 6 and 7 September 2016 - Amman

### I. Current State of Play: The Middle East and its Civil Society

The world's attention has never been as focused on displacement issues as it is today, with displacement related events and discussions taking place at the highest levels. The World Humanitarian Summit (Istanbul 23-24 May); the High Level Meeting on Responsibility Sharing and Legal Pathways (Geneva, 30 March); or the New York High-level meeting to Address Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants (19 September) are examples of its increasing global relevance.

The Middle East and North Africa region accounts for 38% of global displacement, with most countries in the region being affected either as countries of origin, transit, or destination. In the Middle East, the Syria crisis has become the biggest refugee crisis since World War II. The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees remain in the region (4.8 million) and continue to benefit from the generosity of neighboring host countries. However, host countries are **reaching saturation points, with public services and infrastructures under enormous strain**. The support provided to host countries and communities requires a global recognition and implementation of the spirit of international **responsibility sharing**.

Six years into the Syria conflict and in the absence of any immediate tangible peace prospect, Syrian refugees in host countries are exhausting their savings, **falling further into poverty** and increasingly resorting to **negative coping mechanisms**, as evidenced by recent UN, NGO and World Bank surveys and assessments. Cooperation between UN agencies and international NGOs has been well-developed and documented over the course of these years, yet the role of local, national, and regional actors has perhaps not been as well understood.

Against this backdrop, the role of and cooperation with civil society is more crucial than ever, and has been flagged by world leaders as an area to be further strengthened and explored. The evolution of civil society in the region since the start of the Syria crisis is evident, being more **engaged, informed, constructive, and sophisticated in its approaches, contributions, and meaningful impact**. Civil society in the region has stepped in to play a leading role to advocate for, or provide essential services to, persons of concern, however, given the size and reach of displacement, the growing needs on the ground, and decreasing resources, the **engagement of civil society actors needs to be further broadened and strengthened** with a view to ensuring more localized perspectives and more sustainable, effective, inclusive, and comprehensive responses.

The MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement ("MENA CSND") can provide a platform for civil society stakeholders in the region to strengthen and **amplify their individual voices** and actions in favour of the protection and assistance of displaced persons and host communities through **aligned messaging, joint advocacy, training and development, and stronger coordination** on the ground.

Participants in the Sub-Regional Consultations for the Middle East included civil society representation from Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon, ranging from journalists, local NGOs, foundations, universities, national associations, research centers, and private sector representation (participants list attached as Annex 2).

### II. Being Inclusive: Expanding Civil Society

The region has witnessed extensive conflict, resulting in large-scale displacement over the years, which has had an enormous humanitarian impact. Despite the fact that the magnitude of current displacement has surpassed any past references, it remains crucial to **build upon previous experiences and good practices**.

Addressing the current challenges and planning for future post-conflict and reconstruction require **enhanced cooperation** with civil society actors. Given the need to have a more comprehensive understanding of the developments on the ground, and a more granular analysis of events, trends, and opportunities, the approach adopted has been to **expand the current understanding of civil society**, to include, among others, the **private sector, professional organizations, grass-root organizations, academics, foundations, faith based organizations, actors with a stake in post conflict reconstruction, as well refugees and displaced persons themselves**.

The private sector and professional organizations: The private sector's engagement is crucial in **fuelling development by investing in the economy and providing livelihood opportunities** to displaced persons and host communities to move beyond reliance on humanitarian assistance. By reviving business activity and entrepreneurship, normal economic activities are able to resume. This has the effect of spurring both domestic and foreign investment thus leading to wealth creation. Investing in the economy can bring a higher degree of stability.

The media: Journalists' influence on society at large should be capitalized on, by actively engaging media outlets in **promoting social cohesion** and de-mystifying the element of "fear" associated with displacement.

Virtual engagement: Social media and online platforms have greatly influenced the way society interacts and organises itself. A better understanding of virtual communities is needed in order to maximize impact of current efforts.

Refugees and displaced persons: Refugees are key stakeholders of all displacement related discussions and should therefore be a central part of any interventions.

Academia: Academia can generate opportunities for knowledge-sharing, capacity building, joint advocacy, and bridging of the research and policy development gap, leading to better, more evidence-based outcomes in humanitarian responses.

### III. Working together: Common Challenges and Opportunities

Civil society actors in the Middle East faces common challenges and opportunities when working on displacement issues. The MENA CSND aims at building on these opportunities both at a country and regional level.

#### Identified Challenges:

- Protracted nature of the crisis
- Barriers to refugee economic empowerment and livelihood opportunities
- Lack of legal frameworks at national and regional level
- Access to services (education, health, etc.) and social inclusion
- Access to registration and documentation
- Discrimination and xenophobia
- Lack of educational opportunities
- Donor fatigue
- Burden on host communities coupled with pre-existing feeble conditions

- Government focus on security concerns and border management
- Lack of civil society engagement in policy formulation

#### Identified Opportunities:

- Increased global attention on displacement and refugee matters
- Increased opportunities for expanded partnerships
- Existing coordination mechanisms at national and regional levels (in Lebanon)
- Expanded inter-regional linkages
- Enhanced advocacy at national and regional levels
- Refugee and host community resilience
- Enhanced capacity building, cross-fertilization

#### IV. Deepening Thematic Approaches: Regional Thematic Commonalities

**Strengthening education and livelihoods:** The gaps with regard to access to education for all Syrian children remain a concern, and there is a related need for civil society actors to enhance advocacy and coordination. Education should be addressed from a comprehensive approach to lead to livelihood opportunities, self-reliance and social cohesion.

On livelihoods, there is a need for continued policy shifts towards urgent access of refugees into the labor market coupled with increased labor mobility schemes. Continuous advocacy from civil society, including the private sector is needed. A better understanding of current market demands against the profiles of Syrian refugees, in order to maximize job placement will assist in expanding livelihood opportunities. Enhancement of women's skills and livelihood opportunities should be prioritized along with opportunities for youth for both refugees and host communities.

**Creating a positive public attitude towards refugees and an inclusive society:** Advocacy in favour of social cohesion must be strengthened at all levels, along with the creation of linkages between refugees and their host communities. Religious leaders, the media and private businesses should be further engaged in this regard. Support to hosting communities is key in order to ensure responsibility sharing and alleviate current strain. This can be amplified through focus on positive messaging and to capitalize on common cultural aspects and the contributions they can and have been making.

**Strengthening access to registration and documentation:** Access to registration and documentation can prevent social exclusion and promote access to services, livelihoods and nationality. Advocacy towards expanding registration and access to documentation must be enhanced, focusing not only on the passing of laws, but also on the regulatory framework, which can provide faster results. Advocacy should also aim at highlighting the benefits of registration for governments, including concerns for national security, capitalizing on good practices, reduced social exclusion and statelessness prevention.

#### V. Sharing Common Principles: Building on the North Africa Sub-Regional Consultations

The proposed vision, mission and values for the MENA CSND, as developed during the North Africa Consultations, were initially endorsed by participants.

#### VI. Way Forward: National and Regional Tracks

**At country level:** Country follow-up meetings will be organized by 25 October, with a view to consolidating initial thoughts on a national plan of action, defining the thematic focus of interventions and expanding membership at national level. UNHCR will support further discussions at national level

towards the reinforcement or the creation of national coordination mechanisms and implementation of the national plan of action. UNHCR country focal points will also organize a training for country network members on issues of interest.

**At regional level:** The following regional interventions are agreed upon:

- Technical secretariat: The set-up of a roving technical Secretariat is proposed, to build the network structure and support national processes for an initial period of six months (process to be considered by UNHCR).
- A network charter: A network Charter will be drafted and shared with network members for comments.
- Online platform and newsletters: An online platform is proposed for set-up in the next two months, accessible to members only, with the aim of sharing good practices, relevant research, and information on upcoming events. Quarterly newsletters with information on country and regional developments and other relevant information will also be developed.
- Regional webinars: A series of regional webinars (in Arabic when possible) will be organized with a view to enhance the knowledge on the process of building a network as well as specific thematic issues. The topic of the first thematic webinar will be fundraising, to be organized in cooperation with UNHCR PSP.

**Annexes:**

- Annex 1: Schematic summary of discussions and way forward
- Annex 2: Participants list

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September 2016