

Civil Society Network for Displacement
Regional Workshop
15 – 16 December, Amman

Executive Summary

Since 2011, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has seen a dramatic increase in displacement, coupled with striking changes in social, economic, security and political dynamics. The MENA region accounts for 38% of global displacement, with most countries in the region being affected either as countries of origin, transit, or destination, the region is dealing with 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 neighbouring host countries. The set of commitments agreed by Member States in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (19 September 2016) emphasize that protection for displaced persons and support for host communities are a shared international responsibility. Against this backdrop, the role of civil society is more crucial than ever, and has been flagged by world leaders as an area of particular importance.

In light of the enormity of the needs and the nature of the response, local actors have played a crucial and meaningful role. Despite the challenging operating environment for such actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), foundations, the private sector, activists, media personalities, academics, and others have stepped in to advocate for, or provide essential services to, persons of concern. The MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement (MENA CSND) aims to address the calls to strengthen the role of civil society in responding to the crisis by providing a platform for civil society stakeholders in MENA to strengthen and amplify their voices and actions in favour of the protection and assistance of displaced persons, and in support of host communities bearing the brunt of the responsibility. Additionally, given the protracted nature of the crisis, MENA CSND provides a support base for a sustainable response.

Motivated by the growing role of civil society, the MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement provides an unprecedented platform unique in its geographical scope and diverse in its members. On 15 and 16 December, for the first time, and building on sub-regional consultations, civil society partners from the Gulf Cooperation Council region, North Africa and Middle East came together. The meeting saw 70 participants including lawyers, NGOs, foundations, charities, private sector, academics, and media personnel come together. The meeting analysed current regional displacement dynamics; examined the role of the private sector, academia, and the media in responding to refugee crises in MENA; and discussed regional protection priorities including solutions, the building of legal frameworks and social cohesion. The meeting further offered capacitating and skills-sharing sessions on advocacy, social media, and digital fundraising.

1. Protection Priorities

With a view to finding common approaches, participants discussed protection priorities in the region, focusing on **solutions**, **legal frameworks** and **social cohesion**. On solutions there is a growing awareness that complementary legal pathways for refugees are vital in addition to traditional solutions. Civil society's role is unique in pushing forward legal pathways that include academic scholarships, labour mobility schemes, and family reunification opportunities, amongst others.

Recommendations on solutions:

- Increased advocacy and push for refugee labour mobility schemes and freedom of movement within the hosting country;
- Cross-fertilization of good practices in the region to promote access to livelihoods and education;
- Stronger advocacy for legal pathways opportunities.

Exploring legal frameworks and regional modalities which provide protection for refugees and displaced persons and enhance the development of national and regional protection space need to be continuously explored

Recommendations on legal frameworks:

- Enhanced joint advocacy for the **development of national legal frameworks**;
- Communicating with governments to highlight the benefits of documentation of refugees and displaced persons, such as addressing concerns for **national security, capitalizing on good practices, reduced social exclusion and statelessness prevention**;
- Creating a data base on existing legal frameworks, with a view to **sharing good practices in the region, enhancing cross-fertilization and analysing current gaps**;
- Developing a **regional policy framework for the protection of refugees**.

Efforts to bridge the gap between refugees and host communities will ease social tensions, enable the well-being of refugees and displaced persons, and foster solidarity and inclusiveness.

Recommendations on social cohesion:

- Promoting a **more positive public attitude towards refugees and displaced persons** through joint advocacy campaigns, capitalizing on the role of the media in shaping public opinion;
- **Involving refugees** themselves in decision making for solutions that affect them;
- Strengthening advocacy for the granting of **legal status in countries of asylum**, in order to promote **social cohesion and access to services**;
- Increasing **advocacy through faith-based organizations** in favour of refugee protection and social cohesion;
- **Integrating displaced persons** through cultural and artistic programs;
- Advocating for **non-camp settings and focusing on social cohesion** of refugees and their host communities.

2. State of Partnerships in the MENA Region

A questionnaire was completed by each participant addressing the state of partnership with international humanitarian organizations in the region, areas of improvement, and the envisioned contribution of the private sector to the humanitarian sector and the MENA civil society network for displacement. The consolidation showed that the majority suggested that enhanced coordination, information sharing, capacity building, transparency and inclusivity were key concepts and that international humanitarian organizations require improvement. Participants generally agreed that MENA CSND is an ideal platform to involve local actors in the decision making through regular workshops and conferences, in addition to joint research projects aimed to improve humanitarian response.

The results also highlighted a strong consensus on the crucial role that should be played by the private sector, noting that it has often been limited and uncoordinated when engaging with civil society. To emphasize the importance of the private sector it was suggested that they can benefit from guidance from

civil society actors on where the resources and efforts should be directed, with a clear set of objectives essential to defining their role.

3. Expanding Civil Society

Private Sector: The private sector's inclusion in the MENA CSND is crucial for fuelling development by investing in and providing livelihood and job opportunities to displaced persons and host communities

Media: Agreement on the relevance of mobilizing the media with a view to highlighting some of the opportunities and benefits brought on by refugees and displaced persons, advancing common messaging and advocacy asks put forward by the network, and depoliticizing the discourse on displacement

Academia: Research can generate and support in-depth analysis, knowledge-based policy making, information-sharing, and capacity building

4. Structure, Membership, Resources

Structure: The network will consist of a General Forum, a Steering Committee and a Secretariat. The Founding Committee will further define the final names, objectives and responsibilities of each body.

Membership: All active members of civil society with interest in refugee and displacement issues could be considered for membership. The founding committee will further elaborate on requisites for new membership and termination of membership.

Resources: With the understanding that UNHCR will provide initial support to the network with a view to ensure sustainability. The operational budget, membership contributions, and projects will be dependent on resources available. Funding should partly come through membership fees which would complement funding by donors.

5. Way Forward

Leading up to the official establishment of the MENA CSND, this unique gathering of regional civil society actors generated enthusiasm and deep discussions, confirming a common understanding and vision of the value of network. The following next steps were agreed upon by participants:

Establishment of a Network Founding Committee composed of at least 9 civil society members from across the MENA region (3 from each sub-region) with a view to finalize the process of establishing the MENA CSND in the first 3 months of 2017. – Qatar Charity kindly agreed to host the meeting in Doha.

Launch of the MENA CSND to take place in the first semester of 2017, gathering all network members in a region-wide conference.

On-going capacity building activities for civil society in MENA to continue to take place with the support of UNHCR.

Set-up of online platform for the MENA CSND to allow for communication and exchange of information between the members.

The **thematic 2017 priorities for the network** will be further analysed and set-up by the Founding Committee, in close consultation with network members.

6. Conclusion

In light of the deteriorating situation in the region and the deepening humanitarian crises, the network has a **real opportunity** to effectively play a **leading role in addressing the protection of refugees and**

displaced persons, and assistance to their host communities. The meeting highlighted the different perspectives from which some of the partners are engaging, including rights-based approaches, development and resilience approaches, or humanitarian relief and charity. The meeting highlighted the commitment to working **inclusively and collaboratively** and the MENA CSND's strength will stem in part from an ability to reconcile the different starting points in addressing displacement. The diversity of members, backed by a clearly defined common vision, mission and structure will enrich the sustainability of responses to the enormous challenges ahead at this transformative moment in the region's history.

For more information and access to all material related to MENA CSND please visit:
<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/q596mdfmftxehmw/AABN48uM52tV6-AKWZzHEQEja?dl=0>

For additional information, please contact:

Shaden Khallaf, Senior Policy Advisor

Khallafs@unhcr.org

Ali Kawash, Assistant Research Officer, Policy Unit

kawash@unhcr.org

Hayat Abu Samra, Outreach Assistant, Policy Unit

abusamra@unhcr.org