

Developing a Livelihoods Assessment and Strategy

Case Study from UNHCR Jordan



Assessing refugee situations and developing strategies are crucial in ensuring a relevant, targeted, and efficient response. Livelihoods programmes are no exception, as they also require a thorough assessment involving communities, partners, and the local government and private sector. Not only does this provide us with vital information about the current condition of the region, but the process itself contributes to better programmes through increased ownership of all involved.

Livelihoods may be defined as a combination of the resources used and the activities undertaken in order to live. Resources or assets include individual skills (human capital), land (natural capital), savings (financial capital), equipment (physical capital) as well as formal support groups and informal networks (social capital).

Displaced populations carry their knowledge, skills and life's experiences wherever they go. Some bring precious productive assets: their tools, working animals, or financial capital. For UNHCR, protecting refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people (IDPs) also means protecting their livelihoods, in other words, encouraging people to stay productive and to seize new opportunities.

Assessing livelihoods and developing a comprehensive strategy is time consuming and some operations do not have the resources to do so. Therefore, these operations often engage external consultants with expertise in livelihoods issues to provide advice through a strategy document.

UNHCR Jordan developed a quality strategy using their internal resources and networks. This is a story about their experience and the lessons learnt in the process.

Background

UNHCR's main focus in the Middle East includes ensuring that basic humanitarian needs of refugees and other people of concern are met; addressing gaps in the protection of refugees, asylum-seekers and others of concern; and addressing statelessness. Currently there are approximately 500,413 Iraqi refugees and 685 asylum seekers residing in Jordan. In addition, there are 1,890 refugees and 759 asylum seekers originating from Jordan¹.

The UNHCR Jordan office is located in Amman, and has approximately 100 full-time staff members. The office conducts core mandate activities on behalf of a few thousand refugees. This includes the registration and individual refugee status determination (RSD), and the provision of basic humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable refugee families. UNHCR also seeks durable solutions, mostly through resettlement, for refugees in these countries.

In order to help poor families meet their basic needs, UNHCR Jordan has implemented a large cash assistance program, providing cash through an ATM card system. This form of assistance was necessary because those families who have fled Iraq are extremely vulnerable, have no work permits, and are at risk of arrest and detention if they do work there illegally. The funding for cash assistance is mainly targeted at the poorest households and individuals, and will not be available indefinitely. It is critical, then, that Iraqis who remain in Jordan for a prolonged period of time find a way to become self-sufficient.

Why Develop a Strategy?

The Iraqi refugee population in Jordan has come from various educational and societal backgrounds. Many had become very frustrated and suffer psychological distress due to the isolation and idleness that they face. Many were asking for an opportunity to be involved in delivering services to the refugee community (which also can be used as a method to enhance the community based approach²), and many asked for opportunities to expand their existing skills and capacities.

UNHCR Jordan decided to define a strategy to ensure that Iraqi refugees make a smooth transition from relying on humanitarian and financial assistance to becoming self-reliant. For the UNHCR team in Jordan, acquiring a solid understanding of people's existing livelihoods and of the barriers and opportunities they face was an imperative part of the process. Fortunately, the legal environment and procedures implemented to protect refugees were also showing signs of improvement.

In Jordan, many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work on livelihoods activities. As it became more apparent that various initiatives were taking place in isolation of one another, UNHCR Jordan decided to step in and help coordinate all livelihoods activities in the region. To do this, they began by involving all the different actors in the assessment and planning process.

How to Develop a Strategy

UNHCR Jordan formed a small team of four people consisting of international and national staff members from the programme, community services, and education sections. They immediately contacted the livelihoods unit at UNHCR headquarters to ask for guidance and examples of livelihoods assessments and strategies from other countries.

A small informal meeting was organised to discuss livelihoods issues in the region. Key implementing partners who were associated with livelihoods-related activities (such as vocational training and skills development) also attended. Livelihoods issues are rarely discussed at other meetings, and it was necessary to know whether this issue was worth pursuing, what existing initiatives/resources can be utilised, and whether a common assessment and strategy would add value. The implementing partners were enthusiastic and UNHCR Jordan was consequently encouraged to further this project.

¹ www.unhcr.org

² A community-based approach involves mobilizing individuals and communities and supporting them in their decisions about how to cope with the upheaval, re-establish community structures and ensure that protection and solutions respect individual rights. (Taken from 'A community based approach in UNHCR operations: Chapter 3' Legal publications, 1 January 2008. Page 27)

A report template was developed based on the assessments and strategies done by other UNHCR offices. The work was then distributed based on the various interests and skills within the team. Each person in the team was responsible for a few sections:

- The Education Officer focussed on reviewing the current vocational training resources in the country.
- The National Community Services Officer reviewed women's programs and conducted focus group discussions.
- The Programme Officer prepared the sections on coordination, and created the mapping exercise.
- The Community Services Officer gathered all inputs and made sure there was consistency throughout the strategy.

UNHCR staff visited existing livelihoods programmes and interviewed NGO staff about the successes and challenges of these programmes. Focus group discussions were conducted with women, men and refugee youth. This participatory approach was essential in defining what activities the refugees regarded as socially useful, and for designing tailor made activities which will match the full range of different needs, competencies and ambitions. In addition, existing data and information from other organizations was reviewed, including household surveys, employment studies, and reports detailing the country of origin and country of asylum.

During this time, the livelihoods unit at UNHCR headquarters (DOS/OSTS) helped to answer questions and brainstorm ideas about livelihoods in Jordan. Although a mission from headquarters was not feasible at the time, email exchanges and several long phone calls helped resolve a number of issues.

Once completed, the draft Livelihoods Assessment and Strategy document was circulated amongst the implementing partners for final review and approval.

Shortly afterwards, a day-long workshop with the implementing partners, operational partners, and important donors took place to discuss the assessment findings and strategic directions. The workshop involved short presentations of the findings followed by a discussion session. As the document was clearly supported by facts, the discussion focussed on issues that proved more contentious, such as how to target beneficiaries for certain activities. Having a document already prepared helped centre the discussion around specific issues rather than general assumptions.

After the workshop, all inputs were included in the Assessment and Strategy document, and it was circulated amongst all the attendees.

UNHCR Data Collection Software – proGres

proGres is a world-wide standardised refugee registration processing system, designed to standardise the data collection processes associated with refugee registration. Through proGres, refugees can be recognized based on their age, gender, ethnicity, education background, skills, profession or special needs.

According to UNHCR Jordan, proGres added invaluable information. The team focused primarily on generating data about education levels and profession backgrounds. The data was then broken down by age and sex: adult males, adult females, female youth and male youth. The number of disabled people and the dependency ratio (the number of people each working adult has to support) were also taken into consideration as it is important to consider each individual's needs and how this impacts their livelihoods.

Time Required for the Assessment and Planning Process

UNHCR Jordan spent approximately three months on the Livelihoods Assessments and Strategy process and in producing the document. Two months were taken to prepare the draft for the workshop, and inputs were being received up to a month after the workshop.

During the first two months, the four team members worked approximately two days per week on the project, but they spent slightly less time on it during the third month. It therefore took about 64 days of staff time to prepare the strategy, and a few more days to finalise it. Although this seems to be a

lot of time spent on the document, the time was not wasted because while conducting the assessment other ongoing projects could be monitored and a lot more was learned about the refugee community.

Since all the work was completed internally, additional budgeting was not necessary. The only extra expenses (tea, coffee, biscuits) were made when organising the workshop and discussion forums.

Obstacles Faced

Much of the assessment was quite straightforward for UNHCR staff. They were already well aware how to conduct participatory assessments (by previous interaction with refugees); how to monitor programs; run focus group discussions; hold interviews with key people; and make site visits, as these were just a continuation of their daily tasks.

However, it was often difficult to find employment data or information on market trends, but due to support from the ILO, UNDP and World Bank websites, a number of resources were able to be obtained. On the other hand, it would have been helpful to have established links with real experts in the field, particularly with those who understand the local context well.

Initially it was a challenge to compile a comprehensive overview of the situation in Jordan because there were already a number of existing programs and resources available. In the future this could potentially hinder coordination as information that has already been examined may be omitted, or pre-existing information may be repeated.

Strategy Follow-up

The follow-up actions will be coordinated by a livelihoods working group. The group will consist of all NGO actors who are currently involved with refugee livelihoods activities. There will also be a monthly meeting held to discuss updates, lessons learned, and to ensure the smooth transfer of beneficiaries.

UNHCR Jordan will be focusing on protection efforts for the right to work for various groups of refugees. The upcoming participatory assessment (a process of building partnerships with refugees by promoting meaningful participation through structured dialogue) will focus on social capital, as staff knowledge in this area is limited. A microfinance project will also be developed and implemented as other partners are yet to have initiated such a project.