

Social Cohesion and Governance Programming in Lebanon – Testing Theories of Change and Impact Evaluation

With the Syrian crisis in its fourth year, tensions between Lebanese host communities and refugees are high. After years of strain on employment, social services and resources, and the continued deterioration of the national economic situation due to falling trade and foreign investment, Lebanon and the Lebanese face unprecedented challenges managing the effects of the crisis. Furthermore, the economic hardships also erode the relationship between the Government of Lebanon and its constituents, as all confidence in the government's ability to provide services collapses.

Mercy Corps implemented the ten month *Capacity Building for Municipal Responses Project 2* in Lebanon between June 2014 and March 2015 with the support of the British Embassy in Beirut. The project worked with two municipalities, Hermel and Miryata – in the provinces of Baalbek-Hermel and Zgharta respectively – to address the resource-based tensions the refugee crisis is causing.¹ The project sought to empower vulnerable municipalities and communities to mitigate conflict through a two-fold approach to:

- Facilitate collaboration between municipalities and communities to implement social service projects and respond to and mitigate disputes before they escalate;
- Improve municipal financial and operational capacity and local and national government coordination, to enable municipalities to be more responsive to local needs.

The first component, reducing tensions by implementing community service projects, sought to increase access to social services, ranging from water to public waste management. Mercy Corps did this with 40 Lebanese and Syrian community leaders, half of whom were women from both communities, identified, mobilised and trained through the project. The community leaders then worked together to identify resources causing tensions, and with the municipality designed projects to improve access to these resources, while linking them to local government development plans.

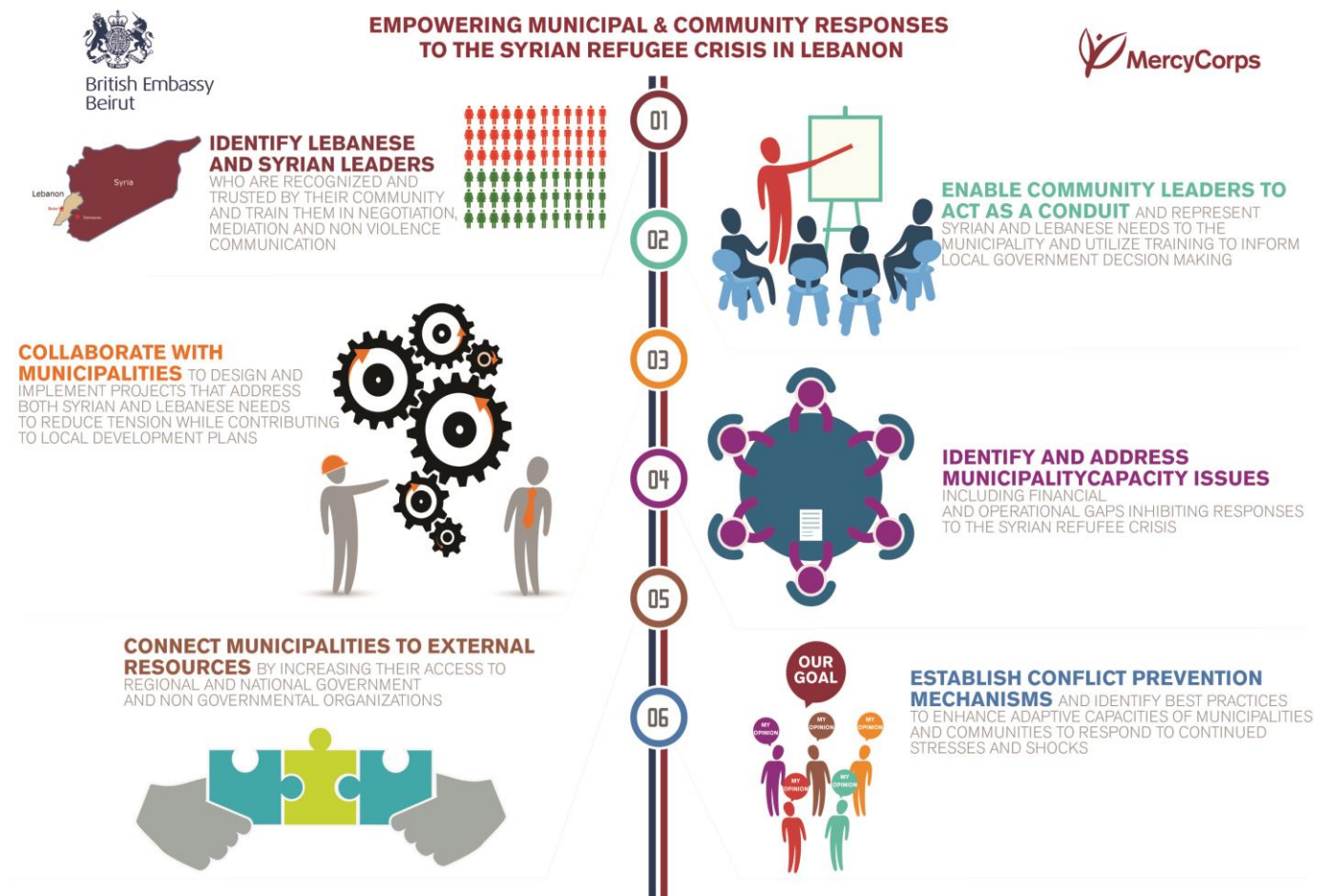
Key Findings

- **Social interactions** between Lebanese and Syrians improve inter-community perceptions by the highest degree; therefore, form the strongest basis for building social cohesion;
- **Access to resources** achieve fluctuating results, with five-times lower impact on Lebanese perceptions of Syrians than vice-versa;
- **Good governance** likewise improves Syrian perceptions of Lebanese, but only marginally improves Lebanese perceptions of Syrians;
- **Economic interactions** are more prone to power dynamics and exploitation, and subsequently significantly vary by community and by the type of interaction;
- **Gender, age and education** also notably impact inter-community perceptions.

¹ A number of assessments identified access to resources, specifically housing, employment and social services as the key drivers of tensions between Lebanese and Syrians. Sources include: Mercy Corps, 2013, *Things Fall Apart: Political, Economic and Social Instability in Lebanon*; Mercy Corps, 2014, *Engaging Municipalities in the Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon*; and Search For Common Ground, 2014, *Dialogue and Local response mechanisms to conflict between host communities and Syrian refugees in Lebanon*

To both test the project’s Theories of Change and measure impact, Mercy Corps utilised household surveys at baseline and endline, and included control locations to ensure change could be attributed to the project. We found that the needs and positions of host and refugee communities are different – the current international focus on increasing access to social services is not achieving the expected uniform impact improving perceptions; consequently, is insufficient to build social cohesion. Rather, access to social services must be combined with facilitating social interactions between the Lebanese and Syrian communities. The purpose of this document is to outline these key findings to inform programming in Lebanon and broader social cohesion strategy.

The infographic below illustrates the components of the project



Through the project, Mercy Corps ultimately sought to build social cohesion² by improving perceptions, attitudes and trust between the Lebanese and Syrian communities. Our experience in building social cohesion globally is based on not only addressing drivers of conflict, such as access to resources, but also tackling underlying misperceptions and lack of trust by building relationships through social interactions. These

² Mercy Corps defines social cohesion as a state of intergroup relations based on behaviours, attitudes and levels of trust and cooperation that promote and foster commitment to and cooperation between groups.

interactions build social capital³ which individuals, groups and communities utilise to collaborate for mutual benefit. Social capital therefore describes an asset or resource while social cohesion describes the state of being of a specific community, place, or country. Social capital is one aspect of social cohesion; it is part of the mechanism through which social cohesion is made stronger (or weakened). Both impact the other: weak social cohesion will contain weak social capital structures. Likewise, strong social capital structures and relationships will positively impact the state of social cohesion. The project attempted to build social capital, both directly on a small-scale, through the community leaders' extensive interactions and collaborations, and on a community-wide scale by creating opportunities for social interactions. These opportunities arose from the social service projects the community leaders designed with the municipality, some of which included building playgrounds and other public spaces, which will, over time, build social capital, and in turn contribute to social cohesion.

Mercy Corps' focus on social capital arises from research showing that it builds community resilience by providing people and communities greater networks of resources to help absorb, adapt to, and transform with shocks and stresses.⁴ Our recent research study with United Nations Development Programme further details the utility of social capital in complex crises, with Lebanon as the case study.⁵

Theories of Change

As illustrated by the project's dual focus on communities and municipalities, Mercy Corps' expected positive change to occur at both levels. The expected outcomes are depicted in the three Theories of Change:

- If Lebanese and Syrians have better access to and satisfaction with municipal services, then their grievances over resource competition will decrease and positive perceptions of the other community increase;
- If the municipalities are responsive to the local needs of Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities, then individuals will be less likely to allow grievances related to lack of services to exacerbate fault lines;
- If Lebanese and Syrians increase the frequency and depth of their positive interactions, then perceptions and trust of the other group will improve.

Methodology & Approach

Mercy Corps conducted household surveys at the beginning and end of the project enquiring about a range of issues, from the level of social and economic interaction between the Lebanese and Syrian communities, perceptions and levels of trust, and views of the municipality as it relates to access to and satisfaction with social services. Mercy Corps conducted 400 individual surveys in each of the two treatment locations of Hermel and Miryata, and 200 surveys in each of the two control locations, for a total of 1,200. Qasr was the control location for Hermel, and Qalamoun for Miryata. The control locations were selected based on comparable ratio of host to refugee communities, socio-economic development, levels of tensions, disputes over access to resources, and the lack of community-based conflict management mechanisms. The inclusion of control groups was vital to attributing changes in the results to the project, rather than external variables.

³ We define social capital as the networks, values, norms, connections and relationships people have that provide for and allow access to services and resources

⁴ Daniel P Aldrich, 2012, *Building Resilience, Social Capital and Post-Disaster Recovery*

⁵ Mercy Corps and UNDP, 2015, *Stabilisation and Resilience in Protracted, Politically-Induced Emergencies: A Case Study Exploration of Lebanon*

All of the surveys were divided 50/50 between Lebanese and Syrian, and a similar number of female and male respondents were likewise sought not exceeding 55/45 either way.

Mercy Corps' utilised the baseline to test the causal relationships between the variables and thereby understand whether the project's Theories of Change hold true. Subsequently, to measure the project's impact a Difference-in-Difference analysis is used, calculating the change in variables over time between the baseline and endline in the treatment locations relative to the control groups. Throughout this document statistical significance is determined at a $p < 0.1$ level or lower.

Testing Theories of Change

Access to Social Services: In Lebanon there is a common perception that access to resources is the primary driver of conflict between Lebanese and Syrians. This narrative stipulates that if communities experience an increase in resource access, grievances over resource competition will be addressed, and there will be a corresponding increase in positive perceptions of the other community. This is summarised in the project's first Theory of Change.

The results of testing this theory support a more nuanced analysis as Mercy Corps found that service provision affected the perceptions of Lebanese and Syrians differently. Specifically, the Syrians react to the provision of social services as hypothesised – a Syrian satisfied with health or education is correlated with a 33% increase and 38% increase in the likelihood of positive perception of Lebanese respectively. However, for Lebanese the correlation between satisfaction with services to increase in the likelihood of positive perceptions of Syrians ranges from small to negligible – in the case of satisfaction with health there is only a 5.9% increase in the likelihood of positive perception of Syrians.

When asked about access, rather than satisfaction, to services there is a similar correlation – for Syrians' access to relief the correlation with the likelihood of positive perceptions of Lebanese is 9.6% increase, while for Lebanese the correlation to improved perceptions of Syrians is only 1.5% increase. Critically, this data suggests that programming solely focused on increasing access to resources to improve social cohesion is incomplete because the improvements in perceptions are one-sided – it improves Syrians perceptions of Lebanese, as Lebanese are providing services. However, Syrians are not providing services to Lebanese; therefore, these types of interventions alone do not improve social cohesion.

Good Governance: A second focus of the project is good governance – ensuring that the process of decision-making is inclusive of and accountable to all social strata. In the Lebanese host-refugee context good governance is likewise connected to resource access by strengthening channels of communication between communities and the state to ensure that the latter is responsive to, and meets the needs of, the former. This logic is represented by the second Theory of Change, *'if the municipalities are responsive to the local needs of Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities, then individuals will be less likely to allow grievances related to lack of services to exacerbate fault lines'*.

Similarly to access to social services, testing the hypothesis during the baseline revealed a marked difference in the correlation between good governance and inter-community perceptions. While the Theory of Change holds true, the impact on perceptions is almost three times higher for Syrians. A Syrian with access to the municipality is correlated with a 23% increase in the likelihood of positive perception of Lebanese, while for a Lebanese access to the municipality is correlated with only a 7.9% increase in the likelihood of positive perception of Syrians. When the question is around satisfaction of the municipality the results are a similar 24% and 7.5% increase for Syrians and Lebanese respectively.

These findings suggest that the work agencies are doing to increase the capacity of municipalities and promote inclusive decision making to improve the responsiveness of municipalities only has a minor role in improving inter-community perceptions, again for similar reasons described above. Programming with municipalities is important, but it should not be the prime vehicle to promote social cohesion.

Social and Economic Interaction: To understand the interplay between interactions and improved perceptions, Mercy Corps measured the depths and frequency of social and economic interaction between the two communities. We hypothesised that social interaction in particular would improve perceptions because these are usually voluntary, whereas economic interactions can also be necessary for day-to-day income generation. Moreover, there is an inherent power dynamic within economic interactions that may result in negative perceptions, and especially in a refugee setting can involve exploitation. The expected change is summarised by the third Theory of Change, *'if Lebanese and Syrians improve the ways they interact, then positive perceptions and trust of other group will improve'*.

The results of the baseline confirms Mercy Corps' hypothesis that social interaction between communities does improve perceptions. A Syrian who daily/weekly has informal discussions with a Lebanese is correlated with a 14% increase in the likelihood of positive perceptions, whereas a Syrian who has informal discussions every 6-12 months is correlated with a 33% decrease in the likelihood of positive perceptions of Lebanese. Similarly, Lebanese sharing a meal daily/weekly with Syrians is correlated with a 51% increase in the likelihood of positive perceptions. Mercy Corps sees such interactions between Lebanese and Syrians as the foundation of building social cohesion.

The effects of economic interactions are more complicated than social interactions as their impact not only depends on the type of interaction, for example employment compared to trade, but also creates different impacts for each community. Syrians engaged in employment through daily and/or seasonal labour is correlated with an 11% decrease in the likelihood of positive perceptions of Lebanese. A probable explanation for this is that such employment is more often associated with hard labour that has less oversight by the authorities, and which may therefore result in exploitive behaviour. There is a similar trend of perceptions decreasing with increasing frequency of interactions in other economic activities where exploitation risks may occur, such as the renting of accommodation.

In contrast, when Lebanese undertake the corresponding interaction with Syrians, there is an increase in perceptions of Syrians because Lebanese are significantly better protected from exploitation. For example, Lebanese borrowing money from Syrians daily/weekly is correlated with a 48% increase in the likelihood of positive perceptions of Syrians, while if this occurs every 6-12 months the increase is 12%. Similar to access to social services and good governance, these results underline the importance of distinguishing needs between the communities because they do not have the same reactions to programming inputs.

Individual demographic characteristics also influence the reactions of people when they are interacting in a range of social and economic exchanges. The impact of gender is inverse between the two communities. Syrian males are 6-7% more likely to have a positive perception of Lebanese than Syrian females – a reason could be perceptions of harassment and exploitation – but for Lebanese, males are 6% less likely to have a positive perception of Syrians than their female counterparts. As competition over employment is one of the leading sources of tensions, Lebanese males' lower levels of positive perceptions may arise from their role in earning household income, and the day-to-day competition with Syrians over employment this role entails. For the Syrian community the impact of age and education is also statistically significant. For example, when a Syrian interacting with Lebanese is in the 18-39 age bracket the correlation is a 5-7% lower likelihood of

positive perceptions of Lebanese; and when the respondent has an upper secondary school education (grade 10) or higher, interactions are correlated with a 8-9% lower likelihood of positive perceptions. Consequently, other demographic variables should be considered during programme design in order to address the spectrum of beneficiaries' different reactions to programmatic inputs.

Impact and Conclusions

To measure the impact of the project, Mercy Corps utilised a Difference-in-Difference analysis, calculating the change in variables between the baseline and endline in the treatment locations relative to the control groups. We achieved increases in access to social services up to 15%, focusing on water and sanitation in Hermel, while for Miryata funds were divided between roads and public infrastructure, and water and sanitation. Impact in social interactions was more significant with, for example, interactions during religious occasions in Miryata increasing by 40%. However, in Hermel⁶ the impact in informal discussions was a decrease of 13%, due, in all likelihood, to the start of the large-scale incursions of Syrian Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) in August 2014, just one month after the baseline occurred, across the Beqaa Valley and the fear and distrust that sowed as the refugees were accused of supporting the AOGs. Alongside the key factor of time being necessary for social interactions to translate into social capital, and in turn social cohesion, the differences between Miryata and Hermel also depict how building social capital is even more susceptible to external circumstances than simpler interventions.

While more difficult to successfully implement, the testing of the Theories of Change indicate that building social cohesion in Lebanon between host and refugee communities requires a more multifaceted approach than the simple access to resources strategy that has hitherto been the focus of internationally-funded programming. As refugees fleeing conflict, being provided with social services by a host government is naturally welcomed by Syrians and improves their perceptions of the host community. Yet this narrative is flawed from the Lebanese perspective because, having absorbed such a historically unprecedented influx of refugees, and the corresponding impact on every aspect of life, it is incongruous to expect that the simple rectification of a portion of this impact through the provision of social services will ensure that Lebanese view Syrians in a more positive light. That there is a correlation between Lebanese access to social services and small increases in positive perceptions of Syrians is important; however, its importance is in stopping grievances from escalating and relations from deteriorating between the two groups, rather than being the sole focus of programming. The significant gulf in the impact of good governance programmes on inter-community relations in which the Syrian perceptions of Lebanese improve three times more than vice-versa reinforces this conclusion that the Lebanese community is not so easily appeased of the burden of hosting the refugees.

While social cohesion programming should address resource access and good governance, the greatest impact on inter-community perceptions will be through building social capital by facilitating social interactions. In this endeavour implementers must remain cognisant that responses and reactions to programmatic inputs will vary not only by community, but also by age, education level, gender, and in all likelihood an array of other factors we are still unaware of the impact of, requiring tailored approaches to both the context, but also to the power and position of the people and communities involved.

⁶ The outskirts of the city of Hermel are a mere 7 kilometres from the Syrian border, while Miryata is in another province with completely different security dynamics



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