



The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة
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Through her ATM card issued by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Joweher monthly receives 175 US dollars that she can use to make purchases for her most urgent priorities.

Photo credit: UNHCR/Sara Hoibak



“It’s all political”

– Tschunkert, Kristina

“It’s all political”

*A Call for a Political Economy Analysis
in Designing, Implementing and Evaluating
Humanitarian Cash-Based Interventions
in Lebanon*

- Tschunkert, K.

*The Asfari Institute
for Civil Society and Citizenship
American University of Beirut*

ABOUT THE ASFARI INSTITUTE AT AUB

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world. In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

THE LAY OF THE LAND:

A Social Mapping of Daily Practices in Informality amongst Syrian Displaced Communities in Lebanon

Funded by the Ford Foundation

This research project examines how, in the face of conflict and crisis, Syrian displaced individuals and communities in Lebanon are attempting to (re)organize themselves within the informal sector to secure access to essential services. We understand informality as a sector of goods and services that is outside of, but not necessarily disconnected from the formal purview of the state. In Lebanon, most citizens are already accessing resources such as water and electricity from within the informal sector. Whereas access to such services might ideally be seen as indissolubly linked to the rights of citizens, the distribution of such goods in Lebanon is hardly equal in practice. The access to goods and services by displaced populations is consequently further compounded in such a context where, by the nature of the country's political economy, must also acquire and secure their rights through informal networks.

By addressing this question of informalization and displacement, we reflect on practices of exclusion as experienced amongst Syrian displaced communities from different socio-economic backgrounds who are otherwise perceived as non-citizens in Lebanon. We aim to document through qualitative methods and life history approaches some of the ways Syrian communities have attempted to harness basic livelihood necessities. In so doing, we examine how the Syrian crisis is contributing to the reassembling of these networks, their hierarchies, and ultimately reshaping modes of governance and state borders between Syria, Lebanon and among Syrians themselves.

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Abstract

“It’s all political” – that is the common answer from many Lebanese people when asked about why and how certain things work in Lebanon, such as the distribution of resources. Despite this ubiquitous use of politics as reasoning for many circumstances in Lebanon, the design, implementation, and evaluation of humanitarian cash-based interventions, as a response to the Syrian refugee crisis, often lacks a political view and analysis, which seems to be at odds with the everyday social realities that people in Lebanon live in. This paper provides an analysis of cash assistance programming in Lebanon, and makes the case for an integration of a political economy analysis in different stages of these interventions. Integrating political economy analysis into existing livelihoods assessments is an especially promising opportunity

that can inform cash assistance interventions, and ultimately make programmes more effective. It can serve to highlight an understanding of processes of vulnerability as a relational phenomenon, embedded within social and political contexts by encouraging, for instance, attention to political and social exclusion. Changes in people's livelihoods and coping strategies need to be matched by an adaptation of humanitarian responses that understand the inherently political processes of vulnerability, and their dependencies on largely local and wider power dynamics. This paper essentially shows that if organisations aim to not only 'do no harm', but to also do 'maximum good', interventions need to be based on a sound understanding of social and political environments that shape, and are shaped by, these interventions.

Introduction

Cash assistance or cash transfers have been used in development relief in low- and middle-income countries since the 90s. In Lebanon, this shift to transfers in cash became increasingly prominent in 2012 in response to the Syrian crisis. While this form of assistance, in comparison to in-kind transfers (food, clothing etc.), is praised as a more dignified and empowering way of supporting vulnerable groups of people, many questions remain unanswered. In particular, it is unclear how interventions might influence social and political dynamics. Cash assistance programmes are not implemented in a political and social vacuum. They influence both recipients' lives and the social relations in the communities where cash is injected. Impact assessments that go beyond material factors are scarce, impact interventions on social relations and other parts of community life that cannot easily be quantified, and continue to be unclear and contested. Lebanon, in this sense, serves as an appropriate case study given the complex history with Syria. The recent experience with conflict and—partly resulting from this—the highly politicised way in which the Syrian crisis and the distribution of resources are dealt with.

This paper has two objectives. First, it aims to give an overview, then scrutinise cash assistance programmes and their evaluations in Lebanon. The social implications and unintended consequences of cash assistance programmes will be explored such that interventions are (a) sufficiently embedded and grounded in social and political realities of everyday life, as understood in relational phenomenon, and (b) whether targeting

of beneficiaries is executed in a unilateral manner that understands vulnerability, in terms of material needs only, and neglects the key role that power dynamics play in determining access to resources, as well as the rights to ensure the ability to satisfy basic needs.

The second objective is to explore the importance of political and social realities that interventions such as cash assistance shape and are shaped by refugees. The case of Lebanon, in particular its history fraught with conflict and intricate relations with Syria, as well as the current complex social, political, and economic realities, invites us to question the way that humanitarian cash assistance is designed, implemented, and evaluated. The apolitical way in which these programmes are often carried out is at odds with the complexities of life in Lebanon that people navigate daily.

In having these two objectives, the paper explores how cash assistance can be designed, implemented, and evaluated in a way that is better informed by community realities, by integrating a political economy approach into existing livelihood assessments, in order to help make interventions more effective and contextually appropriate. Before delving into cash assistance programming in the Lebanese context specifically, a general overview of the emergence and development of cash-based programmes and their evaluations will be given.

The paper explores how cash assistance can be designed, implemented, and evaluated in a way that is better informed by community realities.

Cash assistance, or cash transfers as it is called in development jargon, is not a new phenomenon. Over the past two decades, cash transfers have become increasingly popular in low- and middle-income countries as a form of social protection. Cash transfers are provided in one of two ways: either (a) conditionally, which means that beneficiaries can use the money for certain things only, and may have to adhere to stipulations such as school attendance or regular health checks before receiving it, or (b) unconditionally, in which case there are no such restrictions (Hunt, 2012). In Latin America, where cash transfers were pioneered, mainly conditional cash transfers (CCTs) are used with the aim to “reduce current poverty while developing the human capital of the next generation, in the attempt to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty” (Stampini & Tornarolli, 2012, p. 1).

In the humanitarian sector, this shift from transfers in-kind (typically food) to cash (in the form of vouchers or money given physically or through wired transfers) is a more recent tool used to support processes of survival and recovery from disaster (Harvey & Bailey, 2015). As of today, it is estimated that cash interventions amount to approximately 6% of humanitarian spending (Hagen-Zanker, Ulrichs, Holmes, and Nimeh, 2017). The increasing interest in cash assistance stems not only from the high cost and logistical effort associated with in-kind transfers but also from the notion that cash assistance has an empowering effect, as it presents the beneficiary with a choice over how the money is spent (Molyneux, 2008; Skovdal et al., 2013; Slater, Farrington, Holmes, and Harvey, 2008). Organisations such as the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP) use cash-transfer programmes because they “consider it to be a dignified and flexible form of assistance” (Hunt, 2012, p. 2).

Impact assessments are limited, and often have a strong focus on short-term effects (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017). Because cash is arguably fungible, cash-

based interventions have been shown to reduce financial barriers to cover beneficiaries’ most urgent needs, such as food, rent, medicine, school fees, as well as assets needed for their work (Ulrichs, Hagen-Zanker, & Holmes, 2017). The support cash-transfers for individuals and households to cover their rent can, in turn, lead to improved psychosocial well-being, as it arguably reduces stress levels, and allows them to focus on priorities beyond their short-term survival (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017). Furthermore, receiving additional income may decrease the need to resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as selling assets, protracted debt, child labour, early marriage, and foregoing educational opportunities. Finally, cash assistance is shown to have a multiplier effect on the local economy (Bailey & Harvey, 2015), which implies positive indirect effects on the whole community beyond the targeted population. However, inclusion errors, which represent leakage, as well as issues of corruption and potential inflationary impacts on local markets, should be factored into cash transfer programmes (Slater et al., 2008).

Evaluation of cash assistance programmes also assesses the influence of cash transfers to refugees on social relations within and between households and communities. Findings have been rather mixed; in some cases, providing cash assistance may lead to resentment by the host community, and in others, an increased willingness to socialise and cooperate (Jacobsen, 2002). Targeted cash assistance could possibly exacerbate existing tensions (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017; Skovdal et al., 2013), as relief assistance is understood to distort social relations and entrench inequalities (Gaigals & Leonhardt, 2001). MacAuslan and Riemenschneider (2011) found that there is an aversion to sharing cash, as it might lead to feelings of jealousy and injustice. Significantly, this is contrast with food distribution, as it is often cultural practice to share food, possibly leading to improved relations.

There is a tendency to neglect social and political aspects of relief assistance in programme designs,

as well as their evaluations, as they do not often look beyond material factors that can be easily quantified. This individualistic approach to assistance, thus, overlooks the fact that “social life is an inherently relational phenomenon” (Stroschein, 2013, p. 276). Cash transfer programmes do not merely provide cash; they are pervasive interventions both in the lives of the recipients themselves (MacAusland & Riemenschneider, 2011), and in their relational community life. Assistance, such as cash transfer programmes, should thus reflect

local dynamics and take a more relational approach, informed by the social and political context in the area of interest. Issues linked to politics and power need to be considered in order to ensure a holistic approach to programming and evaluations, as “poverty and vulnerability are inherently political in nature” (Jones et al., 2016, p. 1207). Having giving an overview of cash assistance in Lebanon, these issues will be explored in more detail.

The increasing interest in cash assistance stems not only from the high cost and logistical effort associated with in-kind transfers but also from the notion that cash assistance has an empowering effect.

With the Syrian crisis entering its eighth year, the displacement of an estimated 1,500,000 refugees in Lebanon¹ is now a protracted one. Whereas Lebanon adopted an open border policy in the beginning of the crisis in 2011, the government of Lebanon (GoL) has since 2015 enforced stricter regulations on the inflow of Syrians. Significant restrictions to obtaining and renewing residency permits were introduced in December 2014, which led to a virtual standstill of official refugee numbers since 2015 (Berti, 2017). Syrian refugees currently represent about a quarter of Lebanon's population, and due to the 'no-camp policy', they have mostly settled in host communities throughout the country. The protracted crisis has put a strain on public assets and resources, the labour market, as well as communities' hosting capacities, causing greater stress among both refugees and their hosts (UNDP & GoL, 2017).

To support the fragmented capacity of Lebanon's governmental institutions and infrastructure, the UNHCR has implemented assistance through its myriad partner organisations, mainly through international and local NGOs (GoL & UN, 2017). The programmatic foci of the intervention reach from basic assistance and shelter, education and health, as well as to livelihoods, protection, and social stability. In line with UNHCR's strategic shift from in-kind relief to the provision of humanitarian cash assistance for refugees (UNHCR, 2017), WFP began providing paper vouchers for food in 2012 before shifting to an electronic card system, in cooperation with Banque Libano-Francaise (BLF). In 2013, WFP reached 578,622 refugees with their food vouchers, which increased to 674,189 in 2017 (Bailey & Harvey, 2017). The worth of the food vouchers varies significantly, from USD 13.50 to USD 27 per person per month, depending on the assessments carried out to determine refugees' vulnerability (Jagarnathsingh,

2016). In addition to WFP's food vouchers, UNHCR began providing cash assistance to 66,000 Syrian refugee families, as part of the winterisation programme², using pre-paid cards issued by CSC Bank SAL. By late 2016, UNHCR had reached 700,000 people through this programme (Bailey & Harvey, 2017). Furthermore, a multipurpose cash assistance programme was implemented by UNHCR in 2014, extending USD 175 per month (UNHCR, 2017) to 7,000 households in 2014, to 12,807 in May 2015, and approximately 30,000 by the end of 2016 (Bailey & Harvey, 2017). In 2014, 30 organisations were providing cash and vouchers, resulting in many households receiving different transfers from different organisations.

The work restrictions imposed on Syrian refugees by the Lebanese government has shifted the source of income opportunity from state to international agencies. However, only 9% of the overall response of USD 143 million was mobilised for livelihoods assistance, which has resulted in a stark decline of living conditions, with 70% of registered refugees falling below the Lebanese poverty line at USD 3.84 per person per day (Jagarnathsingh, 2016). Those who desire taking part in income-generating activities have either to work illegally or deregister from UNHCR, which means loss of access to various services including healthcare, protection, and livelihoods.

Hence, these restrictions have not contributed to more formalised residence and work conditions, and have instead expanded the dynamics of informality. Informality in the labour market is not a new phenomenon in Lebanon. Surveys from 2004 and 2009 both indicate that 44% of the country's labour market was based on informal employment³ (Ajluni & Kwar, 2015). This figure reportedly increased by 10 percentage points since the onset of the Syrian crisis (Errighi & Griesse, 2016). It is suggested that

1 - Including 1,011,000 refugees registered with UNHCR (European Commission 2018)

2 - In 2014, UNHCR extended additional multipurpose cash assistance (LBP 120,000 per household per month) and fuel vouchers to Syrian refugees to help them cope with the cold between November 2014 and January 2015 (UNHCR 2014). In the following years, this project was continued and extended.

3 - Inclusion criteria: paid hourly, daily, weekly or on a productivity basis, or working for families.

92% of economically active Syrians in Lebanon work in the informal sector nonetheless, which means that the restrictions did not have a significant impact on the ground. It has, however, impeded Syrians' mobility, as they often need to bypass checkpoints to avoid being arrested if they cannot present legal residency papers. Cash assistance, as such, due to the notion that it will "compensate" Syrians for the lack of access to the formal labour market, under these restrictions, is an inherently political process. However, programme designs, as well as their evaluations, are often lacking a more holistic and nuanced approach that includes social and political contextual factors.

To date, only a limited number of impact assessments of humanitarian aid and cash assistance, in particular, have taken place. UNHCR and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2015) assessed the impact of humanitarian aid on the Lebanese economy, which found that altogether USD 820,038,912, of which USD 358,518,371 (44%) was injected into the Lebanese economy between 2011 and 2014. Considering the combined effect of weakened tourism, decreased exports, and the overall aid assistance, it is assumed that the negative effects of the Syrian crisis on the GDP growth amounts to -0.3%. UNHCR and UNDP (2015) conclude that this would have been more significant without expenditures of humanitarian assistance. However, this study was conducted under the assumption that aid was the only source of income for Syrian refugees, which is evidently inaccurate. Another important limitation is the mere focus on the economy in monetary terms, neglecting social and political dynamics. Using randomised controlled trials (RCTs), International Rescue Committee (2014) attempted a more holistic approach to evaluating the 2013-2014 winter cash assistance programme for Syrian refugees. The study found that local markets were elastic, meaning that the injection of cash for refugees did not result in major price differences on the market. Positive impacts, according to the study, included the multiplier effect of the cash assistance, namely each dollar of cash

assistance spent generated USD 2.13 of GDP for the economy. Besides these economic effects, IRC (2014) claims that cash assistance improved relationships between beneficiaries and other community members, and that it increased mutual support as the treatment group was allegedly more likely to provide help (share money, look after children, help when people are sick, help with housework) to Lebanese community members. It is furthermore suggested that because of the relief of economic stress, people might be able to devote more time to establishing social ties.

However, the use of RCTs, and predominantly quantitative research methods is problematic, as it does not reflect the inherent complexity of either social or political dynamics found in societies. These evaluations aim to assess the impact of assistance in Lebanon but evidently dismiss the importance of historical relationships between Syrians and Lebanese prior to the start of the conflict, shaped by, for instance, the Syrian military occupation of parts of Lebanon until 2005, the presence of Syrian migrant workers in Lebanon, and mutual economic interdependence, with frequent trade across the border. Studies that do not take into account the historical relationship between the two countries provide a very limited assessment of the impact of aid interventions on social and political dynamics in communities in Lebanon. The ethnicisation or, in any case, the categorisation of needs and targeting of beneficiaries for cash assistance is part of a "moral taxonomy of legitimation of rights" (Carpi, 2014, p. 7) that labels beneficiaries in a unilateral manner. The individualistic approach that ignores wider social and political factors may ultimately feed into and reproduce existing cleavages along ethnic and confessional lines. This calls, therefore, for further exploration of the political economy, and the wider social dynamics of humanitarian cash assistance that include these historical relations, as well as the experience of violent conflict in Lebanon, resulting in pre-existing inequalities and grievances.

The potential of working with a political economy approach

The lack of studies goes beyond evaluating internal project goals that take into account social and political dynamics, resulting in an insufficiently clear and comprehensive picture of the effects of humanitarian interventions. This includes a vague analysis of the impact of cash assistance, positive or negative, on refugees and their host communities. Political economy analysis is concerned with the synergy of economic and political processes in a society and “the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time” (Collinson, 2003, p. 10). People’s ability to sustain their livelihoods is affected by a variety of factors that create new forms and patterns of economic, political, and social vulnerability. Vulnerability from a political economy point of view cannot simply be defined in terms of material need; it rather relates to powerlessness, which determines access to resources, as well as rights to ensure the ability to satisfy basic needs. Assets are not merely material resources that provide people with an ability to build livelihoods; they are also the basis of people’s power to act and reproduce, challenge or alter the structural factors that determine, to a certain degree, the control, use, and transformation of resources (De Haan & Zoomers, 2005).

General categories such as ‘the poor’ should be used with caution, as people have intersecting identities, and, depending on their situation, individuals belong to different interest groups, which are not rigid but variable and dynamic. This has at least two implications in the context of humanitarian cash assistance in Lebanon. First, the unilateral targeting approach according to processes of categorisation, explored above, is problematic, in the sense that vulnerability is not regarded as a political and economic process, in terms of neglect, exclusion, or exploitation in which social relations play a key role (Collinson, 2003). Failing to consider wider power dynamics that may determine people’s level of vulnerability, deserving households might be overlooked at best, or, at worst, excluded and ostracised further (Skovdal et

al., 2013). Second, evaluations often prioritise output (Mallett & Slater, 2016). The fact that evaluation reports hardly speak about the social and political processes, explored above, shows that they are mainly occupied with evaluating whether an intervention has met its own internal goals, rather than generating information about the wider ramifications of that particular intervention for people and communities affected by it.

As Stroschein (2013) puts it, not thoroughly engaging the local contexts, full of diffuse relations in programme design, interventions are like “trying to alter a machine that is already in motion – and without a sense of all of its moving parts” (Stroschein, 2013, p. 284). In Lebanon and elsewhere, humanitarian projects operate in contexts of pre-existing and dynamic power relations, and local tensions in which the introduction of new resources, such as cash, can directly and indirectly alter the structural and relational contexts. This alteration may in turn have an impact on the likelihood of conflicts to arise or escalate (Barron, Diprose, & Woolcock, 2001). Cash assistance is injected into local markets, which are not neutral spaces of pure economic exchange but embodiments of existing social, economic, and political inequalities (Mallett & Pain, 2017). In these unequal markets where power relations are constantly renegotiated, cash assistance can have unintended consequences by directly triggering conflicts and by feeding into existing ones, as it presents a resource that can be utilised by different actors. Taking a political economy approach to programming can help ground these intervention strategies in current country realities, making it possible for organisations to reduce the risk of such unintended consequences. Furthermore, it can help to move beyond the technicalities of project implementation and towards an approach that is rooted in the political, historical, and social realities of not only countries but also of communities of concern. This latter point has implications in the Lebanese context in particular, given the geographic, political, and social division along sectarian lines. These divisions in turn influence the distribution of resources as people continue

to rely on religious networks for the provision of goods and services (Mourad & Piron, 2016). This suggests a complex picture of social relations and power dynamics that need to be explored at the micro-level.

Furthermore, policies that support processes of liberalisation, deregulation, and an enabling environment for corporations at the expense of social indicators prevail in Lebanon (Sherry, 2014). Understanding the social and political realities that humanitarian interventions inevitably shape, thus seem to be momentous, in order to be able to bolster beneficial elements of the intervention on the one hand, and to contain its possibly negative unintended consequences on the other. Not addressing underlying contextual factors, such as feelings of injustice over pre-existing structural drivers of chronic poverty, humanitarian actors can add to the government's abandonment (Carpi, 2014), and feed into existing austerity measures. The targeting approaches for cash assistance explored above may, for instance, lead to a renewed sense of victimhood that may exacerbate community oppositions, and, therefore, an increased possibility of conflict.

With reference to these underlying contextual factors, while some interventions, and their evaluations, may include a contextual analysis of formal regulations, it is the recognition of informal regulations that is often missing, which operate along identity lines that are more difficult to decipher, and are no less important (Mallett & Pain, 2017). Looking beyond these formal regulations (going beyond contextual analyses that primarily ask 'what', and moving towards a political economy approach that incorporates the more invisible dynamics in place) instead asks 'why' and 'how' cash assistance interventions can be targeted, implemented, and evaluated more effectively and comprehensively in a way that takes a 'bottom-up' approach. This might make it possible to move beyond general categorisation of vulnerable people towards a more nuanced approach that explores power dynamics influencing the level of vulnerability of beneficiaries.

This includes a vague analysis of the impact of cash assistance, positive or negative, on refugees and their host communities.

Use and operationalisation in practice

The overall goal of integrating a political economy approach into humanitarian interventions is to improve the quality and impact of aid (Mcloughlin, 2014). It can help improve project design by identifying approaches and specific project areas that would work more effectively and be a better 'fit' specific to the political and economic context. It can also help mitigate the risk of unintended consequences and improve the likelihood that donors' funds are used efficiently and that project goals are achieved (Poole, 2011). Political economy analysis in this sense is particularly useful and relevant as it encourages a dynamic (focused on change), broad (changes in one place or group are connected to those in another), longitudinal (historical perspectives are incorporated), and explanatory view (questions of 'how' and 'why' certain changes occurred are asked) that takes context analysis beyond a 'snapshot' assessment of the status or needs of particular communities (Collinson, 2003).

A political economy approach has been criticised for highlighting constraints to aid effectiveness, without necessarily providing solutions for practitioners. Yet it has been shown to offer a way to support better informed aid interventions by providing tangible entry points, taking a problem-driven sector-specific participatory approach, and by being integrated from the design state of programming (Mcloughlin, 2014). In the specific case of cash assistance, integrating political economy analysis into existing frameworks and assessments linked to livelihoods analyses is a promising way to ensure its usefulness and relevance. Murray (2001) identifies three core 'principles' of livelihoods research that outlines the usefulness of such an integrated approach for practitioners: (a) it is carried out at the micro-level in communities, and involves empirical investigation of combinations of modes of livelihood, and of the relationships between them, and changes in these over time; (b) at the same time it is embedded within a macro context, with a clear time-frame and recognition of key variables and trends; and (c) it analyses social relations in the appropriate historical context, which helps explain the circumstances of, and reasons for, vulnerability and poverty. It thus takes a relational view of vulnerability

and asks questions about inequalities of power that lead to the persistence, intractability, and deepening of that vulnerability.

This opportunity of integration into existing livelihoods frameworks implies that organisations often already have relevant operations and assessments in place, alongside which political economy analysis can be increasingly conducted. This approach can help implement cash assistance in a way that is informed by social relations and power dynamics running through them. Denney (2016) mapped out the following preconditions needed for successful integration of political economy analysis:

- By integrating political economy analysis into the design process of programmes provides the opportunity for local realities to inform decisions about projects, rather than retrofitting programmes.
- Some degree of continuity throughout all phases of a project, including key staff involved in the implementation and management of programmes, ensures that political analysis can inform organisations as an inherent part of programming, instead of merely being an 'add-on'.
- Existing technical expertise is still key to successful operations and needs to be combined with political and contextual knowledge.
- It is important to acknowledge the limits of political economy analysis, and maintain moderate expectations, as teams will always work with imperfect information, which is why information should always be sought from a variety of sources.

Integrating political economy analysis into existing livelihoods assessments, and ensuring that these preconditions are met, humanitarian actors can infuse greater realism into practice by discussing power relations and political dynamics more openly within these existing assessments (Copestake & Williams, 2012). Cash assistance interventions can then be designed in a context-specific way so as to ensure that they are the 'best fit' rather than merely 'best practice'.

Conclusion

The increasing shift from in-kind transfers to cash assistance for refugees in conflict-affected societies, which promises a more dignified and empowering approach to relief, is characterised by a lack of more comprehensive context analyses, considering the complex political and social realities that the interventions are embedded in. Cash assistance programmes in Lebanon are not an exception. Evaluations of cash-based projects, in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, have mainly focused on economic impacts and internal project goals that can be easily quantified. The complex history of Lebanese-Syrian relationships, the experience of recent conflict in Lebanon, as well as various policies that promote liberalisation of the economy—including austerity measures that have neglected social development on the one hand, and policies that hinder Syrian refugees to participate in the formal economy of Lebanon on the other—call for a more nuanced understanding of the social and political environment that cash assistance, practically as compensation for this exclusion, is implemented in.

If the implementation of cash assistance programmes, and their evaluations, are not embedded in local dynamics, they may have unintended consequences, and may directly and indirectly exacerbate social tensions, for instance, by feeding into pre-existing feelings of injustice over resource distribution. Taking a political economy approach, interveners can avoid negative repercussions, by moving beyond the traditional categorisation of beneficiaries, towards an understanding of vulnerability that is informed by local power dynamics.

Particularly integrating political economy analysis into existing livelihoods assessments is a promising opportunity that can inform cash assistance interventions and ultimately make programmes more effective. It can spread the understanding processes of vulnerability as a relational phenomenon embedded in a certain social and political context, for instance, by encouraging attention to political and social exclusion. Changes in people's livelihoods and coping strategies need to be matched by adapting humanitarian response to understand the inherently political processes of vulnerability, which depends largely on local and wider power dynamics.

In light of political and social realities, where the government is unwilling and unable to provide support to durable solutions, whilst simultaneously restricting organisations' livelihood programmes due to the 'no-working policy' for refugees, there are two important questions to ask: Might civil society actors, taking over government tasks, fall into the trap of producing 'bailout effects', ultimately facilitating austerity measures taken by the state, and serve as justification of them? And how can political economy analysis, and a more relational approach, be integrated and mainstreamed into livelihood programming, which includes cash assistance, in order to respond more effectively to experiences of poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion in a way that avoids (further) harm and provides real help? Essentially, it is impossible to answer the question of how organisations cannot only 'do no harm', but also do 'maximum good' without basing interventions on a sound understanding of the social and political environments that shape, and are shaped by, these interventions.

Essentially, it is impossible to answer the question of how organisations cannot only 'do no harm'.

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