The HC's Structured Dialogue – Lebanon Workshops – October 2015
Report

Executive Summary

InterAction undertook a mission to Lebanon from October 28 to November 6, 2015 to follow-up on the implementation of the High Commissioner's Structured Dialogue on UNHCR-IFRC-NGO Partnership. The goal of this mission was to learn how the Dialogue is relevant to the context of Lebanon, discuss the state of UNHCR-NGO partnerships, and support actions for further partnership strengthening and complementarity. The mission team held two workshops: one at the country-office level in Beirut and one at the sub-office level in Tripoli.

Observations

- Overall improvements in the UNHCR-NGO partnership in Lebanon produced significant advancements in information sharing; however gaps remain in information management for the overall response.
- Personal relationships, informal communications and networks cited as the primary drivers of improvements in coordination and decision making.
- Decentralization was noted as a factor in the variation in the quality of partnership at the sub-office level.
- While 90% of participants stated that they were committed to strengthening UNHCR-NGO partnership, amongst both UNHCR and NGO staff there was limited awareness of the High Commissioner's Structured Dialogue and recommendations to strengthen partnership.

Key Recommendations

- Enhance the information management network - particularly analysis and dissemination processes - to improve coordination among all actors within the response.
- Make the existing coordination structures more strategic as fora for problem resolution with better inter-sectoral and field linkages to strengthen joint planning.
- Develop an official capacity building framework to strengthen the capacity of Lebanese NGOs, municipalities and affected communities.
- Conduct an analysis of UNHCR's 2014 decision to decentralize operational decision making to fuel further conversation on the right structure to ensure all aspects of UNHCR's "triple hatted" responsibilities (coordination, leadership, and implementation) are appropriately managed and prioritized response-wide. The outcome needs to be widely shared within the response.
- Request a follow-up workshop on the IP Framework with facilitation by high-level personnel from UNHCR's Implementing Partner Management Service (IPMS).
- Document and disseminate specific examples of good partnership practices, such as collaboration within the cash consortium and the well-functioning sectoral coordination in the Tripoli sub-office.

Background

Lebanon is host to approximately 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees, many of whom have sought refuge since the start of the Syrian crisis almost five years ago. Refugees now constitute approximately 25% of the population in a country with ongoing stability challenges. This unprecedented and sustained refugee presence has meant more response staff, more partners and an increased need for efficiency within the response.

InterAction, in close consultation with UNHCR and the US Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), chose Lebanon for follow-up on the HC's Structured Dialogue on UNHCR-NGO Partnership based on a combination of factors. Over the past couple of years as the response scaled up InterAction member NGOs reported challenges within the UNHCR-NGO partnership; from information management and coordination with all partners to the implementing partner relationship. Through recent leadership changes within UNHCR in country, InterAction and UNHCR saw an opportunity to move forward with the workshops as a platform to strengthen the relationship.

The Lebanon workshops follow on the heels of successful missions to the Democratic Republic of Congo (2014), Pakistan (2014), Kenya (2015), and Chad (2015). It is the third of four country missions slated for 2015 in partnership with ICVA and UNHCR.[1] Two additional country missions are scheduled for 2016.

The workshops were well attended with **59** senior UNHCR, international and national NGO staff. Please see annex 1 for the full list of participants.[2] In addition to the workshops InterAction met bilaterally with UNHCR, UNDP, OCHA, national and international NGOs, and the steering committees of the INGO and national NGO forums to gain a deeper understanding of the operational context and UNHCR-NGO partnership.

Workshop Methodology

Prior to the start of each workshop the participants filled out a pre-questionnaire to gauge awareness of the Structured Dialogue, improvements over the past year and level of commitment to UNHCR-NGO partnership. The agenda included an overview of the Principles of Partnership, an introduction to the Structured Dialogue, a brief review of the Structured Dialogue's ten recommendations[3], a plenary discussion on what is working well within the operation, and small group discussions on areas for improvement and recommended actions.

To the extent possible small groups had a balance of implementing partners, operational partners, and UNHCR staff. Participants were asked to identify two to three specific issues related to the selected theme and propose recommendations and suggested actions for improvement. The results of the discussion are outlined below.

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[1] ICVA is scheduled to complete a workshop in Myanmar in December 2015.

[2] In Beirut **18** INGO representatives, **11** local NGO representatives, and **8** UNHCR representatives attended for a total of **38** participants. UNHCR staff and partners from the Zahle sub-office were also invited to participate in the Beirut workshop. In Tripoli, **6** INGO representatives, **7** local NGO representatives, and **8** UNHCR representatives were present for a total of **21** participants.

[3] **joint assessment**, **analysis, prioritization and strategic planning**; **information sharing; joint advocacy**; **IDPs**; following up **government pledges** made on refugees and statelessness; **strengthening capacities**; **urban settings**; **review of fora for collective dialogue**; **complaints mechanisms** and a **yearly report.**

Beirut Workshop

Pre-workshop questionnaire

Before the workshop, only 15% of participants indicated full awareness of the Structured Dialogue. Participants were asked to share whether they had experienced improvement in various aspects of the UNHCR-NGO partnership over the past year. The results were as follows:

> **Information sharing**: 54% = improved, 46% = a little improved, 0% no improvement
> **Advocacy:** 28% = improved, 56% = a little improved, 16% = no improvement
> **Planning:** 40% = improved, 48% = a little improved, 12% = no improvement
> **Grant Management:** 33% = improved, 52% = a little improved, 14% = no improvement

Introductory remarks

UNHCR Assistant Representative for Programs, Jean-Marie Garelli, opened the meeting with appreciation for the good turnout, despite the universal meeting fatigue. He noted that the Principles of Partnership should be the point of departure for the working relationship between NGOs and UNHCR and encouraged participants to focus the day's discussion on concrete areas for collective action. He emphasized that while one workshop would not solve all of the partnership challenges, participants should take the opportunity to step back and discuss partnership in a strategic manner.

Partnership successes

In a plenary discussion participants offered that information sharing has improved greatly over the past two years, particularly with regard to the process to apply for UNHCR funds. Joint planning has also improved, contributing to increased trust and collaboration on advocacy efforts. The two-year planning cycle allows for more sustainable programming, which has in turn facilitated better collaboration and partnership. NGOs noted that UNHCR has reached out to others actors for support in implementing their programme, demonstrating a certain level of humility. Cash programming was also identified as an example of complementary partnership between UNHCR and NGOs.

Areas for improvement

While these improvements are legitimate and important, some noted that they have only come about recently, and that a successful partnership moving forward requires a thoughtful look at the practices of the past. For instance, the decision made by UNHCR to decentralize much of its programmatic decision making authority to the sub-offices was made without consulting the NGOs. Opinions on decentralization varied among NGOs in terms of improvements in coordination and program management at the sub-office level. An analysis of the added value and costs of this structure, its impact on the quality and flexibility of service delivery is recommended.

Further areas for improvement were explored in small group discussions on the following topics: **capacity building, coordination, joint planning** (2 groups), **information sharing,** and **advocacy**. Following is a brief summary of the identified challenges and proposed actions:

Capacity building

Capacity building for national NGOs occurs but in an ad hoc manner. While UNHCR has increased the number and volume of grants to national NGOs they need more capacity strengthening in terms of fundraising and program management. INGOs have a clear role to play to build capacity within the

response, particularly by sharing technical resources and managerial expertise. The group noted that local communities, including refugees, need to develop conflict resolution and leadership skills to enhance ownership and resilience within the context of this fragile, protracted crisis.

Proposed actions:

- Identify resources for and develop an **official capacity building mechanism** for national NGOs housed within either UNHCR or an NGO body.
- INGOs and/or UNHCR **conduct workshops** on proposal development, finance and administration, do no harm, accountability, and other topics for Lebanese NGOs.

Coordination

Coordination remains weak; meetings are more often used for information sharing than operational coordination. There is a perception that decisions are made outside of sector working group meetings. This applies to coordination amongst the sectors, inter-agency coordination, and operational sectoral coordination at the field level. The group cited disconnects between Beirut and the field offices as well. Specifically the small group felt that some sector coordinators have difficulty separating their role as agency representatives from their role as coordinators of the response and that the interests of their agency affiliation are prioritized and represented over the collective. They noted that although some sector coordinators are able to maintain a separation between the two roles, it is the exception.

Proposed actions:

- **Strengthen information management** practices to reduce field-country office disconnects.
- Create space in coordination meetings for **more strategic discussions**.
- Undertake a **review of UNHCR's decision to decentralize operational decision making** where the analysis is based on the impact on the wellbeing of persons of concern
- **Further clarify** and **communicate** the roles and responsibilities of **sector coordinators, at both Beirut and field-level.**

Joint planning

Joint planning is hindered by the limited participation of local NGOs and host communities and a lack of clarity on the state of and longer term vision for the response. For example, one of the barriers to participation is the fact that most meetings were held in English. National NGOs have limited human resource capacity to participate in the volume of coordination meetings. A regular review of the state of the response that is then communicated widely would help national NGOs understand and contribute to the joint planning process. Specific to improving joint planning, more collaboration between INGOs and national NGOs would help to better engage national NGOs in the planning process.

Proposed actions:

- INGOs and UNHCR should encourage and **strengthen local alliances** with national NGOs to better engage them in the joint planning process.
- **Review response plan bi-annually** against evolving needs and longer term outcomes and **communicate** analysis with stakeholders to help ensure the universal understanding of the state of the response and to ensure that the response strategy is effectively translated into action.

Information sharing

The group noted that UN and government discussions often occur outside formal and multi-stakeholder coordination structures and are not communicated in a timely manner with NGOs. It is understood that some discussions are sensitive and need to occur informally, yet there is a need to ensure that "informal" information is shared appropriately and sufficiently. There were additionally two suggestions made to reduce disconnects between Beirut and the field; work at the core group level could be better leveraged if agency representatives are given time to consult and report back to their constituencies. It was also suggested that sector working group coordinators spend more time at field level coordination meeting to increase linkages between the country and sub-offices. Concerns were also raised that information sharing channels are not sufficiently institutionalized. For example Activity.Info works well but its use is constrained by the technical and human resource capacity of the agencies that use it.

Proposed actions:

- Sector Working Group coordinators should spend more time at field-level coordination meetings to **increase linkages** between field and national-level conversations.
- **Embed information sharing** and coordination into agreements, core activities and partner job descriptions.
- **Capacity building** for partners, particularly management level staff, on how to use technical and web-based information management tools.

Advocacy

The group questioned the way advocacy in-country had been managed to date, characterizing it as topically ad hoc, inconsistently transparent. They described advocacy initiatives as driven by like-minded organizations with common goals. Moreover it was unclear what impact past advocacy efforts have had, making it difficult to know what advocacy approaches should continue. They noted that though there is a lot of information available, who takes the lead in analysis? Is the data available to those who need it for advocacy purposes?

Participants suggested that strengthening collective advocacy should start with transparent information sharing and joint data analysis to ensure collective buy-in and to facilitate better evidence. With this, a theory of change exercise should be conducted to hone in on desired advocacy outcomes. Advocacy efforts could also be enhanced by better communication between national and field offices to ensure consistent advocacy messages. Noting that Lebanon now has a joint response plan with the government, and government-led sector working groups, the group asked what the right mechanism or forum would be for developing, monitoring and adapting humanitarian advocacy.

Proposed actions:

- Establish transparent information sharing on **best practices** in advocacy including **anonymized data.**
- Identify jointly the most appropriate **fora** for a more **strategic and systematic approach to collective advocacy.**

Tripoli Workshop
Pre-workshop questionnaire
In advance of the workshop 38% of participants indicated full awareness of the Structured Dialogue. Participants were also asked to share whether they had experienced improvement in various aspects of the UNHCR-NGO partnership over the past year. The results were as follows:

> **Information sharing**: 76% = improved, 24% = a little improved, 0% = no improvement
> **Advocacy:** 42% = improved, 53% = a little improved, 5% = no improvement
> **Planning:** 55% = improved, 45% = a little improved, 12% = no improvement
> **Grant Management:** 52% = improved, 42% = a little improved, 6% = no improvement

Introductory remarks
The UNHCR Sub-Office Head, Monica Noro, opened the workshop with the recognition that collectively they are confronted with a complex and large operation that allows for little time to stop and reflect. She emphasized that the discussion would be a unique opportunity to examine recent changes and ways of working and might allow for the identification of best practices in partnership which could be shared from the North sub-office and replicated elsewhere. Finally, Monica reminded participants that there is always room for increased collaboration and strengthened partnership at all levels of the response.

Partnership successes
Participants identified **information sharing** as the most visible element of improved partnership over the past year. Participants felt that when NGOs contribute data they receive analysis in return, which helps in their decision making. Many felt that decentralization has been responsible for the improved information sharing at the North sub-office level. Additionally, UNHCR's Refugee Assistance Information System (RAIS) was identified as open and available to operational partners.

Implementing partners shared that there was indeed a significant amount of **reporting** required but felt that it was not burdensome but rather a tool which helps partners and UNHCR understand the state of a program. This said, reporting through the sectoral working groups is too frequent for certain sectors. For example, weekly reporting is appropriate for distributions but not necessary for shelter. Some participants also felt that there are too many indicators to report on; others felt that some of the indicators written in Beirut were not relevant to their operation.

Joint planning was also considered effective because every sector inputs and develops an action plan which contributes directly to the 2016 action planning. When NGOs develop their own projects with UNHCR they work with UNHCR sector leads to design programs and develop proposals based on a joint gap analysis of participatory assessments. From a UNHCR perspective the sectoral working groups are meant to be strategic, not just a forum for information sharing and coordination. The context demands that all humanitarian actors come to the table, prepared and ready to be partners, to reduce duplication and maximize limited resources.

Additionally, UNHCR's ability and willingness to **advocate** with and on behalf of NGOs is deeply appreciated, particularly in terms of joint advocacy with municipal leaders.

Participants identified a few areas for small group discussion that could improve and strengthen partnership. The topics chosen were: **refugee rights** (upholding refugee and stateless conventions), **information sharing**, **capacity building**, **transparent complaints mechanisms,** and **urban programming**. Following is a brief summary of the identified challenges and proposed actions:

Refugee rights

Currently refugees are detained at checkpoints which in some instances limits their freedom of movement. Collective action on this issue was identified as a priority for the group. Additionally, the participants identified a number of factors that contribute to the challenge of upholding refugee rights in Tripoli. The first is that Lebanon is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or Protocol. There are also challenges locally; in communicating with ministries and municipal leaders on the topic of refugee rights as well as in the local community perception of refugee assistance, parity of support to impoverished communities. It was noted in the discussion that an inter-governmental pillar exists within the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). This could be the right platform to encourage the government to coordinate on an inter-ministry level.

Proposed actions:

- NGOs and UNHCR should **work together** on a multi-target **sensitization campaign** to educate nurses, teachers, ISF, and others through workshops and joint activities.
- UNHCR, and partners as appropriate, should-continue to advocate for an enhanced **inter-ministerial coordination** to discuss major issues related to refugees and host community.

Information sharing

The small group had different opinions on the outstanding challenges of information sharing, noting a significant volume of information is available, however the plethora of actors providing information and number of avenues to find it make accessing the information needed difficult. Partners expressed a fatigue with the volume of assessments and suggested that an assessment registry be used, which would reduce the chance of duplication. They identified three main information management gaps within the response at the sub-office level: managing confidential information; partners and donors sharing their fundraising/contribution plans (to improve complementarity, prevent duplication); and information sharing with the government. It was agreed that all parties need to be more diligent in ensuring that information is shared. There was consensus that a "one stop shop" with easily accessible information would be ideal.

NGOs asked if UNHCR could improve the accountability of sector leads responsible for communicating reporting requirements and deadlines for sectoral information sharing. Reporting was also noted as an area in which some partners need additional capacity support. UNHCR noted that approximately 90% of partners submit their reports after the deadlines set in their Project Partnership Agreements (PPAs). According to UNHCR, these reports are critical both at the country level in terms of information sharing and response coordination and at the headquarters level where they can be consolidated and strengthen the case for additional resources.

Proposed actions:

- UNHCR should request heads of agencies to provide notice if they are **applying for funds from other donors**. This information should also be shared with sector leads to **mitigate duplication of activities** and ensure that proposed spending is in line with priorities.
- Ensure **greater accountability on activity info reporting** at the sector level and across all working groups, with sector leads ensuring that partners know the deadline for reporting and have a clear understanding of how to report against all indicators.
- The Inter-Agency should increase partner **awareness of existing systems** available, including the **online assessment registry** and partners should ensure they are **regularly reporting all assessments** through this mechanism.

Capacity building

The small group elaborated on a wide variety of challenges. Partners expressed the need for more capacity building at the local authority level as many local bodies lack the capacity to deal with the influx of refugees, which leads to delays in the response. Many of these local actors need training on humanitarian principles and issues. It was noted too that it is not just national NGOs that need capacity building; national NGOs have much to impart upon international NGOs and the UN as well. Municipalities also need capacity strengthening and it is sometimes difficult to get them to focus on humanitarian issues. There are attempts to bridge these gaps. For instance UNHCR is now inviting local authorities to meet and discuss their challenges. However a more thorough approach is needed.

The first step in addressing these challenges is increasing awareness amongst partners on agency programming priorities and approaches. This should be complemented with a mapping of partner strengths, capacities, and resources alongside a mapping of partner capacity needs. The group stressed that capacity strengthening must occur in parallel with delivery, with clear objectives and characterized by a participatory approach. If this is done, the group hopes it could be documented and feed into global best practices.

Proposed actions:

- Following endorsement and promotion at the central level, there should be engagement with local government on what **principled humanitarian action** is and why it is critical.
- Develop and implement a **capacity strengthening** strategy that is systemic, contextually grounded, and sustainable which leverages the abilities of all partners, including municipal leaders. This should be preceded by a **mapping** of capacity strengthening needs and existing **opportunities**.

Transparent complaint mechanism

The group focused on limited awareness existing mechanisms to safely communicate complaints from the affected population towards aid providers and complaints amongst partners. They noted that, justified or not, refugees are afraid to raise complaints to UNHCR.

Proposed actions:

- **Clarify** at the sub-office level what **structures** are in place to transparently manage complaints about or from partners, **share information** on the structures and the complaints themselves with partners.
- Partners should **share complaints** in working group meetings.
- Increase distribution of **informational fliers** for beneficiaries on where to confidentially direct complaints and concerns.

Urban programming

Effective urban programming in Tripoli is challenged by limitation in information sharing and the need to strengthen collective approaches. There is need to share and consolidate studies amongst partners as well as obtain institutionalized data from the municipal government

Proposed actions:

- Enhance **regular information sharing** mechanisms amongst municipal leadership and partners on humanitarian support to urban populations.
- The Protection Working Group should establish a **platform** to map urban strategies and improve sharing of urban programming in Tripoli. As a result, an **action plan** will be drafted to consolidate and harmonize these activities for the urban context.

Conclusion and Next Steps

After participating in the workshops, 89% of participants indicated they felt more knowledgeable about the Structured Dialogue. After the workshops 98% of attendees reported that they were more committed to improved UNCHR- NGO partnership.

This report will be shared with UNHCR's Lebanon operation, to NGOs in Lebanon via distribution by the Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum (LHIF) and the national NGO Forum. Additionally the report will be shared with the Partnership Unit and the Implementing Partner Management Service (IPMS) within UNHCR Geneva.

InterAction will consult with NGOs and the UNHCR office in Beirut to determine the most appropriate form of workshop follow up, most likely to be either a teleconference in May or a survey.