

Jordan: Community Support Committees

Empowering Refugees through Local Communities

November 2017

Community Support Committees (CSCs) in Jordan provide a novel and community led approach to respond to the needs of urban refugees, bridging gaps between refugees and Jordanians, and helping UNHCR to give the right assistance to those who need it most.



More than 50% of the world's refugees are now in urban settings. Reaching out, understanding and meeting the needs of diffused populations in urban and rural settings poses a key challenge to UNHCR in refugee response. In Jordan, over 80% of refugees, both Syrian and other nationalities including Iraqi, reside outside camp settings. Therefore, being able to find, talk to, assist and understand refugees living in urban areas is a necessity for ensuring that UNHCR delivers its mandate successfully. At the beginning of the Syria crisis, refugees living outside of camps without any prior links to Jordan were feeling isolated, with a lack of information on services available to them and with few contacts within their own community or with their hosts. Other nationalities faced similar issues, with their smaller communities making isolation more profound, and their plight often overlooked due to the greater visibility, scale and focus on Syrian refugees across the world.

The movement of Syrian refugees into the towns and cities across Jordan happened swiftly and on a huge scale. At the end of 2012 there were 170,000 new Syrian arrivals registering with UNHCR, compared to 22,000 at the end

of 2011 – an almost seven-fold increase. By December 2013, there were 292,000 new arrivals from Syria seeking protection under UNHCR’s mandate, which has grown to over 650,000 in 2017 (from a total refugee population of over 730,000 as of September 2017).

The impact of the influx was unprecedented for a small, middle income country like Jordan with its limited capacity to provide support beyond its population. Local communities and services fast became overwhelmed by the rising numbers, as the majority of refugees were absorbed into villages, towns and cities. As the influx grew and refugee communities settled, there were reports of water shortages and overcrowded classrooms; demographic pressures and the competition for resources were a potentially combustible mix. At the same time, UNHCR looked to different ways of engaging with a large diffused population across urban and rural areas, in an effort to understand their needs and work together with them to provide the right assistance.

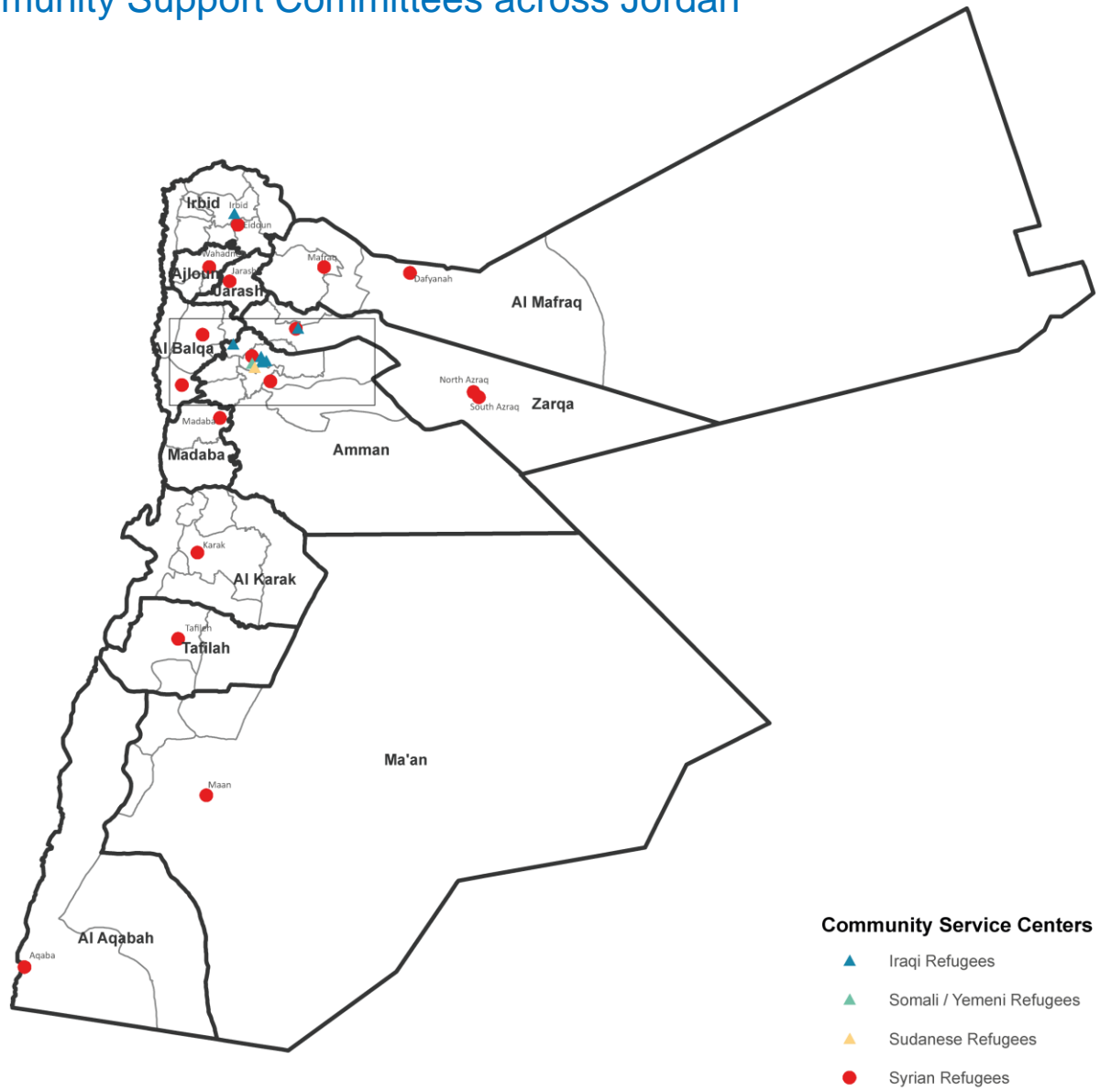
From Irbid near the northern Syrian border, to Jordan’s southernmost city Aqaba on the Red Sea, UNHCR teams met daily with refugees, their representatives and members of the host community to hear of their challenges and concerns. These missions were to set the groundwork for one of the most effective community-based protection responses deployed by UNHCR, the Community Support Committees (CSCs), which would develop over time to also cater to the needs of other refugee populations including Iraqi, Somali, and Sudanese.

Living outside of camps, and away from the multi-faceted services they provide, can give more freedom and self-determination, but comes with its own challenges. Those deciding to settle outside of camps may face serious consequences when this violates national laws and policies, such as the risk of detention for working informally or not carrying the correct identification papers. Access to populations can be challenging for UNHCR. If people are isolated from their communities they may not know their rights, entitlements and who to turn to in exile. Refugees in these circumstances may also feel deterred from registering with UNHCR, or even making contact, placing them beyond the effective reach of UNHCR’s protection and assistance. CSCs are designed to bridge that gap. They serve as a gathering place, and a “face” for UNHCR in the community.

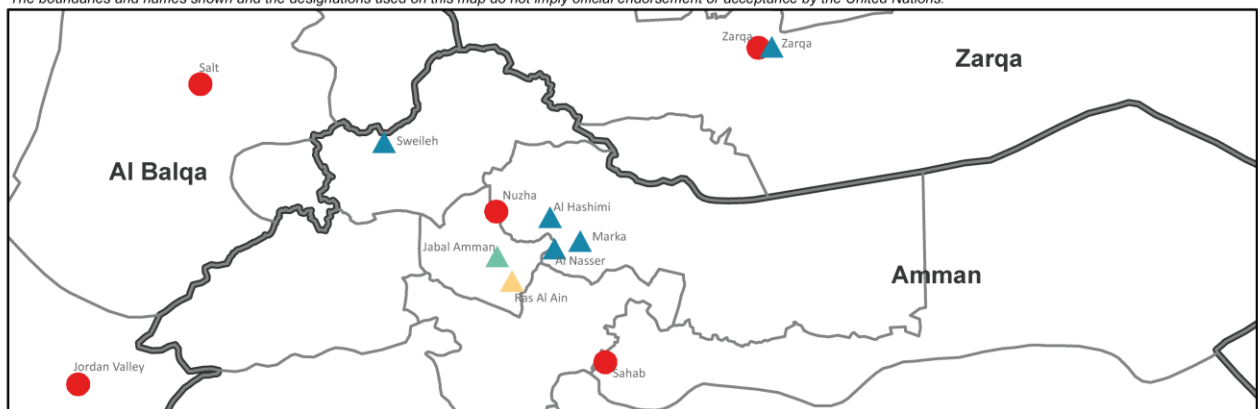
How Community Support Committees Work

Today almost 200 members of both the refugee and host community, including members of community organizations and representatives from local authorities, are active in 25 CSCs – 17 for Syrians, six for Iraqis and one each for Sudanese and Somalis – across the country. The CSCs contribute to the coexistence and cohesion between refugees and host communities; allowing a space for community dialogue to address different issues that affect communities; providing a platform to relay important information on issues that affect vulnerable communities; developing skills and livelihoods training as well as recreational activities, targeting divergent community groups.

Community Support Committees across Jordan



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.



CSCs are each overseen by a group comprised of a chairperson, typically from the host community, and approximately 12 members equally divided between the refugee and the local population. The representatives from the refugee community are intended to reflect the make-up of their community with sub-sections including the young, the elderly, women, men, people with vulnerabilities, and those living with disabilities. Members from the host community are intended to be equally representative and may include sheikhs, mukhtars, imams, priests, teachers, retired civil servants, female heads of household, and members of local community-based organizations.

Each group decides upon and supports four to six activities per month organized at venues run either by UNHCR partners, the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD), CARE and International Relief Development (IRD) or facilities belonging to community-based organizations under the auspices of the government's Ministry of Social Development. They meet regularly to plan their respective activities and again separately to include field staff from UNHCR or partners on issues directly impacting refugee and host communities in a particular area.

While CSCs are intended to operate with a high degree of autonomy to independently address the needs of refugees and Jordanians, UNHCR provides extensive technical support and training to CSCs on a regular basis to enhance the knowledge of its members on important protection themes affecting the refugee community. UNHCR community-based protection staff visit each of the country's CSCs on a weekly basis to evaluate and monitor the progression of activities. UNHCR also assists with the organization of "town hall meetings", mobile refugee registration sessions and "helpdesks", as well as providing a small stipend to committee members to support communication and transportation needs.

CSC activity examples:

- Bringing refugee and Jordanian children together in team activities that include basketball, chess, football, face-painting or tree planting. CSCs also organize mixed kindergartens.
- CSCs have worked to counter perceptions of the elderly as a burden by exploring the richness of life experiences of the community's elderly members. One activity is "hakawati", or storytelling, where the elderly share their life stories with younger members. The sense of purpose of transferring culture and tradition to younger people is especially powerful, by allowing for the transfer of traditions they feel are dying out, including, for example, wedding traditions in southern Syria.
- CSCs organize regular skills training activities for women, including business start-up courses for refugee and Jordanian women alike. Almost all of the women who benefit from these CSC activities have never earned any form of income and the activities serve as a welcome form of empowerment.
- For men and boys, sporting activities are always requested to help alleviate stress. Mixed teams of refugees and Jordanians compete against each other across the country. Men and boys also meet in focus groups to discuss the everyday issues that affect them, while information sessions provide advice on issues from rental agreements to accessing formal work.
- CSCs bring people with disabilities together for peer support, to hold information sessions on a range of services available and referrals for crutches, wheelchairs and blood sugar testing. CSCs also allow the community at large to hear of the issues that affect people with disabilities, helping them to design inclusive activities and facilities which are more accessible.

Impact

Responding quickly to refugees' needs - Being embedded in the community allows UNHCR to respond quickly to issues that may affect refugees with the support of their hosts. For example, during the heavy snow storms that swept across Jordan during the winters of 2013 and 2014, CSCs were able upon UNHCR's request to quickly identify those refugee and host community families most in need of assistance. On the basis of the information provided by CSCs, UNHCR was able to plan and deliver significant quantities of winter items across Jordan. Local communities and refugees mobilized to distribute items to communities most affected. CSCs also facilitate referrals in the areas of health and education and intervene in urgent matters including eviction and detention.

Reducing community tensions - The large influx of refugees into Jordan in recent years has led to unprecedented pressures on the infrastructure and services. The pressure has at times heightened tensions between refugees and members of the local community when local services are stretched and unfounded rumours of preferential treatment occur. CSCs have from the outset played an important role in reducing tensions and facilitating inter-community mediation. CSCs provide a space for grievances to be aired and for peaceful and constructive solutions to be sought. For example, tribal conflicts that have arisen between Jordanians and Syrians have successfully been resolved using traditional communication channels such as "Jaha"¹.

Helping refugees on the road towards self-reliance - Most recently CSCs have developed to great effect as a platform to help refugees move towards self-sufficiency. While refugees were largely dependent on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs such as food, health care and shelter, CSCs are now being used as a platform to further skills training and livelihood opportunities. As the refugee situation becomes more protracted and funding is increasingly diverted to other displacement emergencies, CSCs are helping to shift the emphasis to resilience and sustainability. CSCs provide a platform for consultations, Focus Group Discussions and town hall meetings, which include dissemination on key areas including how to apply for a work permit and announcements on available jobs offered by interested companies. CSCs have also allowed UNHCR to channel business grants to its members as a catalyst to home-based businesses.

¹ "Jaha" is a Jordanian term to describe a tribal communication mechanism to either amicably resolve conflict or difference, or to approve or validate practices such as marriage. "Jaha" are typically adjudicated by respected members of the community.

Adeeb and Mohammad

One dance, two cultures



A music and dance group has become an instant hit in Jordan's coastal city of Aqaba for its unique take on Syrian and Jordanian folklore. The creative force behind the project - Adeeb, a Syrian refugee and Mohammad from Jordan, both 22-years-old - combine movement and sound traditions from their respective cultures into a spectacle that's serving to transform Aqaba's cultural scene.

Adeeb fled war in Syria in the early days of the crisis in 2012 and was determined that adversity would never prevent him from pursuing his dreams. "For as long as I can remember, our neighbourhood back in Syria was alive with music and art and people singing and dancing at every corner. It became part of who I am and it's something that I cannot afford to lose".

Shortly after arriving in Jordan, Adeeb met Mohammad at a choral event facilitated by UNHCR's CSC in Aqaba. Mohammad remembers the moment vividly. "When I first met Adeeb, I felt an instant connection. We sat down and shared videos and insights into our respective cultures. We had so much to talk about - I felt I had known him for ages."

Energized by their cultural fusion and shared interests, the pair formed a band with a mixed group 16 other friends, each with their own music and dance interpretations. "It was not easy merging music and dance from both cultures as Syrian folklore includes a rural style from the countryside while Jordanian Bedouin traditions are very much rooted in the desert", explains Mohammad.

The group tours the city performing at weddings and an array of other celebrations. "Folklore tells stories about the community and society more widely. Merging both Jordanian and Syrian traditions provides the audience with a better understanding of both cultures. It highlights our diversity and similarities but at the same time protects and preserves our identity", says Adeeb.

The band is not the only thing the group has in common. "We are all the same age and share similar concerns and issues but for perhaps different reasons. It is important that we stay together to support each other because hard times are better when you're close to the people you love", says Adeeb. Away from their performances the group spend most of their free time together, playing football in local tournaments, practicing taekwondo, diving in the Red Sea and even horse riding on the coast.

The bond they share, cemented by their artistic talent, has ensured that they're now well-known in the community and they are conscious of their role in spreading an important message: regardless of nationality or race, life's obstacles are easier to overcome in good company.

"I miss Syria and always talk about my country with my Jordanian brothers. My hope is that one day I can go back and invite them to my house, to welcome them with the hospitality they have shown me during my time in exile", says Adeeb.



Story by Laith Abdulhadi and Olga Sarrado

Conclusion

As the Syria crisis has evolved since its advent in 2011, UNHCR has looked to different ways to reach populations. Growing from community protection outreach visits across the country between 2011 and 2013, the Community Support Committee model has best served as a way to bring refugees and Jordanians together, increasing community cohesion, reducing isolation, responding quickly to needs and working as a key conduit for concerns of both communities to UNHCR.

The 25 CSCs now have over 200 members, and reach not only Syrians, but also Iraqi, Sudanese and Somali populations in the capital Amman and covering all parts of the country from Irbid in the north to Aqaba in the south. They allow for more community self-determination in response to their needs, while also recognizing that UNHCR support is still valuable and needed to provide its mandated protection to refugees. By knowing the community, we know how to better provide for them.

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