United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
المفوضية السامية للأمم المتحدة لشؤون اللاجئين

Roundtable on Enhancing Dialogue and Partnership between Academia and Humanitarian Actors on Regional Displacement Crises in the Middle East and North Africa Region

26-27 April 2017, Amman

Roundtable Report

1. Background

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is facing a complex set of inter-related and dynamic challenges including the biggest displacement crisis since World War II. While representing 5% of the world's population, the MENA region accounts for almost 40% of global displacement, with most countries in the region acting as countries of origin, transit or destination.

Academia, including professors, think tanks, research centers, universities, is uniquely placed to better understanding this crisis by generating knowledge which can drive evidence-based solutions, inform programming and influence policies related to displacement, refugee needs and host communities. Academia can provide fora for analysis and critical thinking, bridging the gap between the academic, policy, and humanitarian development realms. At a time when discussions on the future of engagement on displacement issues are taking place, following the September 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrant and looking towards the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), the voice of academia is even more critical. In the New York Declaration, member states stressed that comprehensive refugee responses should involve a multi-stakeholder, "whole-of-society" approach that involves civil society partners, including academia.

Organized by the UNHCR MENA Policy Unit, in partnership with the West Asia-North Africa (WANA) Institute, the first of its kind regional roundtable for academia took place on 26-27 April 2017 in Amman, Jordan, bringing together academics, think tanks, research centers, and university professors from 12 countries to discuss their role in humanitarian interventions. The discussions brought to light challenges that academia faces, and generated concrete suggestions and good practices in relation to solutions. They also aimed to understand the role of academia in responding to the humanitarian/displacement crisis, identify how and when to engage academia and identify the channels academia can use to act as bridges between stakeholders, governments and humanitarian organizations to better respond to the needs of displaced persons, refugees and host communities.

In an engaging and powerful statement, His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan expressed his appreciation of UNHCR's work in the region and support for the roundtable. His Royal Highness highlighted the need for stronger collaboration in response to the region's crises. Collaborative efforts between countries in the region, and the adoption of regional approaches were described as essential for engaging the majority in creating meaningful change. Emphasis was also placed on multidisciplinary collaborative efforts which look ahead to building and sustaining peace, and beyond addressing immediate humanitarian challenges.

2. Challenges and Current Discourse on Refugee Crises in MENA

The large-scale displacement crises resulting from conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya have put the refugee issue into the limelight, with the public and political discourse related to refugees in the region increasingly veering towards being negative, riddled with xenophobic rhetoric and general fear. In order to increase the impact of academic contribution to positive humanitarian action, research capacities must be enhanced. The current political climate and regional instability pose challenges related to the undertaking of research, including lack of access to data and field locations, lack of resources, lack of

freedom of expression, and imposition of research topics. There is also a lack of investment in regional research capacity due in part to the fact that donors and INGOs tend to dedicate their resources to research centers and universities outside the region.

> *"As researchers we have a key role to play in advocacy to lobby policy makers and advocate change in the public discourse in our own countries and globally."*

Participants agreed that they should act as a bridge between policy-makers and practitioners, but that a major challenge to shaping policy is the need to have greater access to policy-makers and to be included in the decision-making data-collection process.

3. The Role of Academia: a Stock-taking of Academic Contributions to Regional Displacement Crises

Several universities highlighted ongoing initiatives to support refugees and to better understand their plight, including through the inclusion of refugee youth in the design and implementation of the initiatives, including language courses, offering financial scholarships, working with university alumni in influential positions. An initial compilation is attached (Annex I), with a view to identifying opportunities for synergy and collaboration among institutions and individual professors across the region.

4. Policy Development- the Impact of Targeted Research

An analytical look at the current systems in place highlighted some obstacles, with quality research flagged as a key component for improvement. Suggestions to develop a 'code of ethics' or a 'research protocol' to ensure that the quality of research and evidence is up to standard were largely welcome. Other common challenges included the ability to conduct studies without concern over political sensitivities and parameters set out by some authorities. This was noted to be further complicated by a disconnect between academics and policy makers. It was therefore agreed that enhancing collaboration among academics in the region can serve to strengthen their position, and act as an umbrella for joint action, and to help them speak the language of policy-makers.

> *"Academics need to learn to speak the language of the policy maker, it's a challenge for academics to step out of their framework and speak the language of reality."*

5. Solutions and Education Opportunities for Refugees

The need for tertiary education for refugees in the MENA region is substantial. Among roughly 650,000 Syrian refugee youth, a fifth of them would have pursued tertiary education had they not fled their countries of origin, but only 5% of those young refugees are currently enrolled in tertiary education across the region.

A number of challenges, including: lack of access, lost documentation, verifying the validity of documentation, language limitations, tuition costs, transportation limitations, and limited sponsorship opportunities lead to low enrollment numbers in higher education. Despite ongoing interventions in this field by UNHCR and other organizations, there is scope for more work on access to education across the region. Refugee youth should also be involved in the development of curricula to ensure that their needs are taken into account. Additionally, there is an urgent need to develop stronger programmes that link education and skills to employment opportunities. There were calls to establish a fund that supports with job placements post-graduation.

*"There must be something academics can do to work with the private sector to see
what the education needs of refugees are."*

Academics confirmed the importance of working with donors to offer sustainable scholarships to refugees (scholarship funds), and linking them to pathways to employment. Furthermore, embracing e-learning technology that allows students to learn remotely by taking courses online mitigates the challenges related to access as a result of mobility limitations. While participants agreed on the importance of higher education, several called attention to the urgent need to supplement higher education with skills training, and the need to equip students with necessary skills and link students with employers in the private sector.

6. Policy Frameworks and Refugees' Access to Rights

At a regional level, the legal status of refugees varies from one country and sub-region to another. The global discourse related to laws and legal frameworks in the MENA region often emphasizes the absence thereof. This discourse, however, does not reflect the realities as many countries across the region have adopted laws to respond to the situation and generally abide by them. Additionally, the 1951 convention was written in a different context, and does not apply well to the countries currently hosting the largest numbers of refugees. Therefore, there were echoing sentiments that law practitioners should develop and agree on a more collaborative law across the MENA region, to ensure that all refugees and forced migrants access the same rights in each host community.

Most participants agreed that the law is not a product of civil society, but rather the product of decisions made by government officials who do not necessarily reflect the needs of civil society. Therefore, draft laws should be articulated in association with civil society. Civil society and academics must confront authorities to create a clear linkage between their needs and state laws.
Academics can improve the insufficient legal framework by advocating for the inclusion of international conventions, increasing research in the area of migration law, and support amendments to the 1951 convention that make them more collaborative in nature and better reflective of the current situation.

7. Towards a Global Compact on Refugees: The New York Declaration

The New York Declaration was described by experts from UNHCR HQ as a response to the large movement of refugees and migrants originating from the MENA region, which set forth a number of joint commitments, applying to both refugees and migrants, given that they share the same journeys, and are subject to similar abuses and vulnerabilities.

Annex 1 of the New York Declaration sets a framework for comprehensive responses, and Annex 2 sets out a process for safe and orderly migration and is not an operational framework, as it centers on the human rights of migrants and people on the move and deals with the drivers of migration. With thematic discussions taking place in Geneva throughout the year, and with the Annual NGO Consultations in June, and with the High Commissioner's Dialogue in December focusing on the global compact and CRRF, it was noted that there were a number of opportunities for academics from the region to contribute to shaping the substance of the discussion, leading up to the finalization of the process in 2018.

In addition to concerns regarding the absence of MENA pilot countries, participants raised questions regarding the exclusion of IDPs from the New York Declaration. There were also calls to look at the root causes leading to IDPs and recognize that there was a need to look more comprehensively at the full cycle of displacement, from prevention to response, to solutions in the long term.

Participants emphasized the opportunity to seize the moment and initiate suggestions to maximize the impact of the declaration. It was agreed that academics would look at the gaps and propose papers/research to the global compact team who can then identify areas where academia can contribute more meaningfully.

MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement
Following a presentation on the MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement (MENA CSND), participants expressed significant interest working more closely with and contributing to the network. The creation of a sub-group of academics in the MENA CSND was agreed. This subgroup would serve as a coordination platform between academics and other actors also working on displacement issues, including NGOs, community based organizations, media, and the private sector.

8. Concluding Session

The session stressed the importance of addressing a major issue that is influencing current crises response mechanisms and humanitarian actions, namely security. The MENA region, plagued by large-scale conflicts, requires more space and resources for human development and humanitarian action. In this regard and given the current political climate, it is increasingly difficult to convince donors to change the budget priorities towards such humanitarian and development needs. There is a need to revisit the international humanitarian construct to change the discourse surrounding the increasingly vulnerable MENA region. One way to change the discourse is through initiatives like the roundtable, which advocates for collaborative work to reach impactful solutions.

The above formed the basis of the discussions in the concluding session with participants reaffirming their commitment towards refugees and host communities to assure that related programmes have a positive impact on both host and refugee communities. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the need to bridge the gaps between the objectives of international organizations and the concerns of the local governments, communities, academics and civil society actors. In this regard, it was agreed that academics can bridge that gap by bringing together all relevant stakeholders. It is increasingly imperative that academics undertake such collaborations to get out of their traditional role, and engage in activities and research that reflect the realities on the ground.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Enhanced cooperation between academia in the region**
   a. **Shaping the narrative**
      i. Collective action to shape a more balanced and objective narrative on regional refugee crises
   b. **Joint research proposals on:**
      i. the impact of pledging conferences
      ii. Syrian refugee returns and conditions for voluntary repatriation
      iii. the link between security concerns and migration
      iv. the evolution of humanitarian assistance in the region
      v. the impact of cash-based interventions

   vi. focusing on innovative solutions

   vii. common understanding of social cohesion

   viii. statelessness

  c. **Use of a common language, methodology and common platforms**

   i. Catalogue of who is doing what

   ii. Common regional code of ethics or protocol for research

   iii. Arabic as a common language of research

   iv. Civil Society Network for Displacement as a common platform for engagement

   v. Better/strategic use of technology

   vi. Building on sub-regional/institutional strengths

2. **Advocacy and policy development**

  a. **Identification of "entry points" with policy-makers**

   i. University alumni as entry point

   ii. Technocrats as entry points

  b. **Research of interest for policy makers**

   i. Identifying common areas of interest

   ii. Formatting and structuring findings in short, easily digested formats

   iii. Bridging the gap between politics, policies and civil society

  c. **Relationship with donors**

   i. Creating incentives for investment in academia in the region

   ii. Enhancing the north-south collaboration

   iii. Providing research on accountability for donors

   iv. Engaging with more donors in the MENA region

   v. Ensuring that academia owns the data

3. **Relations with United Nations Agencies**

  a. **Common research**

   i. Access to data and field – UNHCR facilitation of access to field

   ii. Identification of common areas of interest

   iii. UN investment in academia's research capacity

  b. **Research for better humanitarian interventions**

   i. UNHCR to incorporate academia in the planning cycle

   ii. Promotion of genuine research that leads to better programming

   iii. Academia incorporated in multi-functional teams

  c. **Linking practitioners and academics**

   i. Information sessions for academia (i.e. Gulf)

   ii. Cross-fertilization of skills

4. **Higher education opportunities as a solution**

  a. **Skills provision and future employment**

   i. Linkages with the private sector to understand skills and the market needs

   ii. Linking education opportunities with future employment

  b. **Scholarships for refugees**

   i. Investment fund – not just scholarship funds, but providing pathways to employment for refugees that will then enable refugees to contribute to their host communities

   ii. Consortium of universities to offer hybrid degrees

           iii. Waiving fees for refugees

   c. Distance/online learning

   d. Validation/accreditation of refugee studies

           i. University entrance exams for refugees

   e. Environment that is conducive for refugees

           i. Academia must be able to shed a positive light on refugees and help the youth foster a positive perception of refugees

   f. Engage refugees

           i. In development of curricula

           ii. In advocacy efforts

           iii. In understanding their own situation

           iv. In providing them with additional accompanying services

5. Law and academia

   a. Using the judiciary strategically

           i. When law is not an option, the judiciary can evaluate policies (Lebanon example)

   b. Looking at laws and policies that enable access to services for refugees

           i. Regional traditions and religious norms matter

           ii. Current laws that enable/might enable access to services

   c. Advocacy for ratification of international instruments