BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION IN LEBANON'S BEQA'A VALLEY
Results from the RECOVER Program

MARCH 2019

Lebanon hosts an estimated 1.5 million refugees from Syria in a country of 4.2 million people—the highest ratio per capita of refugees in the world. The sheer number of refugees in the country has outstripped the ability of the Government of Lebanon and the international community to respond, leaving municipalities at the frontline of the crisis. The Beqa'a hosts 342,000 Syrian refugees, comprising 40% of the regions population and the largest proportion in Lebanon.[1] The drastic population influx has put pressure on already stretched public services and infrastructure. Unemployment rates are high and perceived competition for employment contributes to rising tensions between Lebanese and Syrians. Uncertainty as to when, or if, refugees will be able to return to Syria heightens the risk of tensions becoming institutionalized and manipulated by political actors, mobilizing communities against refugees and potentially triggering violence.

Reinforcing and Empowering Communities to Overcome the Effects of the Syrian Refugee Crisis programme (RECOVER) was an 18 month programme funded by the European Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) that aimed to empower vulnerable communities and municipalities to prevent violence, through reducing tensions and drivers of conflict caused by the Syrian crisis. Building off lessons learned from Mercy Corps programming on governance and social cohesion under the framework of the Social Stability sector since August 2013, RECOVER worked with municipalities and communities to strengthen their ability to address key sources of tension as well as their capacity to work collectively to identify and address local needs.

Mercy Corps Approach to Building Social Cohesion

To prevent conflict from escalating into violence, Mercy Corps increases social cohesion by building relationships between conflicting groups, whether between ethno-religious or political groups, or communities and the government. We create opportunities for cooperation over shared interests, such as natural resources, basic service provision, and economic development. With cohesive relationships, people are better able to ensure that rumors, misunderstandings, and smaller disputes do not escalate into violence.[2] If Lebanese and Syrians increase the frequency and quality of their social and economic interactions, then perceptions of the other group will improve.

About the Reinforcing and Empowering Communities to Overcome the Effects of the Syrian Refugee Crisis (RECOVER) programme

Goal: Prevent violence by reducing tensions and drivers of conflict

Objective: Strengthened ability of municipalities and communities to address the perceived root causes of conflict, including protection concerns

Timeframe: 18 Months; December 2016 to June 2018

Budget: $2,000,000 USD

Donor: European Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP)

Location: 9 municipalities Lebanon's Beqa'a region
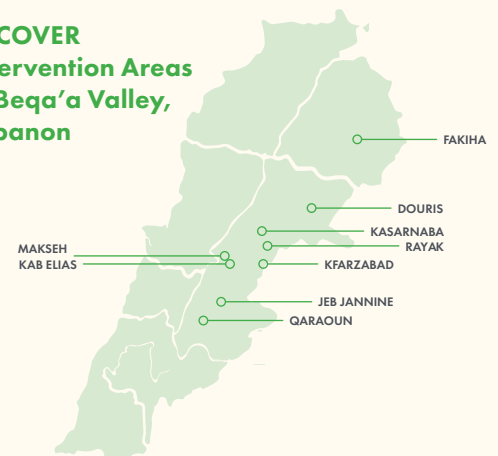
Results: 73% improvement in intergroup perceptions as a result of engagement in community events

261 disputes resolved by LG members with enhanced dispute resolution capacities

70% increase in municipal cooperation and coordination with local and regional actors to address service access

3.8% increase in belief that communities are more peaceful, safe and secure

RECOVER Intervention Areas in Beqa'a Valley, Lebanon

FAKIHA

DOURIS

KASARNABA

RAYAK

MAKSEH
KAB ELIAS

KFARZABAD

JEB JANNINE

QARAOUN

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1   United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Bekaa and Baalbek/Hermel Governorates Profile. Retrieved on March 25, 2019 from https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71
2   Mercy Corps (2019 Jan). Peace and Conflict Approach.

MERCY CORPS

RECOVER Theories of Change (ToC):

❯ If Lebanese and Syrians increase the frequency and quality of their social and economic interactions, then perceptions of the other group will improve.

❯ If Lebanese and Syrians have better access to and satisfaction with municipal services, then their grievances over resource competition will decrease.

❯ If individuals feel they can expand their livelihoods and meet their current and future household needs, then they will be less likely to have negative perceptions against the other community and resort to violence.

RESULTS

To help communities in target villages feel safer and enjoy greater social stability, RECOVER built the local capacity of community members and municipalities to address disputes, engage in municipal affairs, and increase interaction between Lebanese and Syrians.

Community and municipal representatives have improved knowledge and skills in mediation, negotiation and protection to help defuse local conflicts, and address protection concerns

9 **Local Groups (LG)**

established in each of the 9 target areas

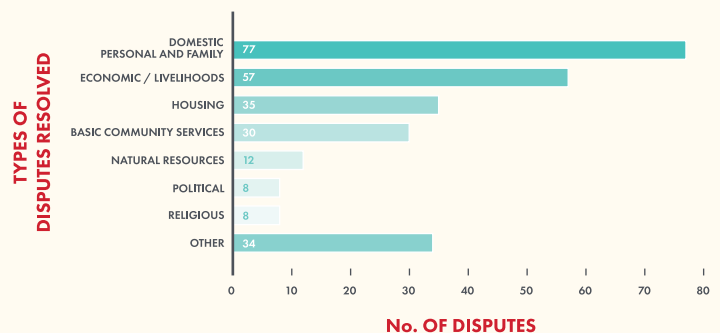**LG Members were:**

50% Female

50% Male

80% of LG members improved skills & knowledge in mediation, negotiation and protection

Foundational to the RECOVER approach was the establishment of 9 local groups (LG), one in each target village, comprised of a total of 231 community members representing Lebanese (38%), Syrians (39%) and municipal representatives (23%). RECOVER was careful to select the right calibre of community leaders for LGs through a process that prioritised their resolve in being agents of change, skills in mediating difficult interpersonal issues, and legitimacy in the eyes of their communities. Once selected, core training on communication and mediation provided the LG members with a sense of empowerment and the linkages with the municipalities built their legitimacy to act. COP members completed "nonviolent communication, peacebuilding, and mediation" training of trainers to train their communities, enabling them to have a more active role in sustainability. For example, by the end of the program the Qaraoun LG had delivered the training in the village and surrounding Syrian refugee tented settlements thereby magnifying the knowledge of nonviolent communication, peacebuilding and mediation skills.[3]

261 Disputes Resolved by RECOVER LG Members

TYPES OF DISPUTES RESOLVED

Type	No.
DOMESTIC PERSONAL AND FAMILY	77
ECONOMIC / LIVELIHOODS	57
HOUSING	35
BASIC COMMUNITY SERVICES	30
NATURAL RESOURCES	12
POLITICAL	8
RELIGIOUS	8
OTHER	34

No. OF DISPUTES

❯ *"When we sat at the same table, heard their stories and understood their situation, we saw them as peers."*
— Municipal Staff (Lebanese), Douris

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3   Mercy Corps (2018, June). Final Narrative Report: RECOVER – Reinforcing and Empowering Communities to Overcome the Effects of the Syrian Refugee Crisis, p. 30.

Community and municipal representatives have increased capacity to identify and implement community projects responding to local needs

64 Community Projects

Community Livelihoods Projects addressed resource tensions

Community Engagement Activities addressed social and relational issues

731 Vulnerable Lebanese and Syrians benefited Cash-for-Work activities
18% female / 82% male
34% Lebanese / 66% Syrian

73% Improvement in intergroup perceptions as a result of engagement community events

RECOVER worked with LGs to identify community projects through participatory needs assessments (PNA) which were implemented jointly with Lebanese and Syrian LG members and integrated with Cash-for-Work (CfW) activities. Community projects and engagement events brought Lebanese and Syrians together for positive social interactions, which led to improved perceptions of the other. However while there were discernible positive cha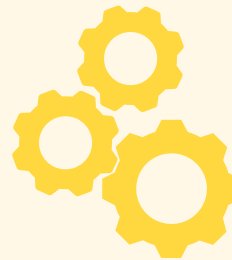nges on the individual level with Lebanese and Syrian LG members' perceptions, this did not effect attitudes across the broader community.[5] Additionally, community projects were a platform to provide vulnerable Lebanese and Syrians with temporary employment through livelihoods projects aimed to address resource-related tensions and livelihoods needs of the community by providing temporary employment using the (CfW) modality.

Municipalities have improved financial, operational communication and coordination capacities to manage service delivery

70% increase in cooperation and coordination at the local and regional level to address service access among municipal representatives

79% municipal representatives trained had improved capacity in finance, operations and communications

Mercy Corps believes that improving perceptions, attitudes and trust between Lebanese and Syrian communities strengthens social cohesion. Though civic engagement activities, such as town hall meetings, are the social activity type most strongly correlated with increasing social cohesion overall, in the areas of intervention these were occurring with very limited frequency and most baseline respondents reported never having attended these type of events.[6] RECOVER worked with municipalities to identify new communications channels and supported activities with LGs to more deeply engage the community with local government. 21 new channels of communication tools were developed as part of RECOVER to engage the public including newsletters, films and town hall meetings.[7] To increase transparency, capacity and trust from the community in municipalities, municipal staff, council members and community members completed training on financial, operational, and communication capacities with follow-up coaching and mentoring by a local NGO.

> *"People thought the municipality couldn't help. Now, they know differently. Mercy Corps contributed to breaking the barrier of silence between the municipality and the people."*
>
> — Municipal staff, FGD, Douris

4   Mercy Corps (2018, June). Final Narrative Report, p. 33.
5   Tabaja, S. (2018). RECOVER Final Evaluation Report, p. 30.
6   Mercy Corps (2018). RECOVER Baseline Report, p. 27 and p.18.
7   Mercy Corps (2018, June). Final Narrative Report, p. 61.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

RECOVER aimed to achieve a greater sense of peace, safety and security in communities, however the design of the programme focused on individual level achievements through interpersonal connections and dispute resolution which did not lead to the targeted level of change in perception at the larger communal level.

Gains on social cohesion at the individual level do not translate to community wide improvements for social stability. While the project achieved increased social and economic interactions which are both strongly correlated with increased trust of individuals of the other nationality within the respondents' communities, they are not extended to increased trust of the other nationality group as a whole. In order to have wider community level change, the approach should conduct in-depth conflict analysis and engage communities in the analysis to improve targeting communal conflict factors. Future programmes should engage community members in analysing the results to strengthen identification of community projects and engagement activities as well as increase attendance and inclusion.

Local Group success and sustainability is dependent on strong municipal commitment. Where there were strong, committed municipal key actors as allies, the project was able to secure greater municipal commitment, LG participation, and communal support as well as have greater potential for long-term sustainability. Conducting concurrent or consecutive training and implementation with LGs and municipalities would reinforce learning and catalyze coordinated momentum. While municipal capacities are expected to remain following the project, LG groups expressed need for external guidance and financial support to stay active. Supportive municipalities will help sustain LG activities.

Inclusive planning of events does not necessarily translate to attendance from all communities. RECOVER's community engagement events were relatively small, targeted to certain groups within a population (such as youth or women) and in some cases did not pay sufficient attention to making sure Syrian refugee community members were able to attend, particularly in cases where the municipality was responsible for issuing invites, thus resulting in little to no attendance of Syrian refugees at some of the programme's community engagement events. In addition to planning events in a participatory manner, effort must be made to actively invite individuals from different groups (nationality, religious, etc.) and to make sure events are accessible to all those who might want to attend (i.e. transportation costs for most vulnerable).

While Cash for Work (CfW) can bring people from different communities together, this does not always translate into social cohesion, particularly in the presence of unequal power dynamics. While participants were satisfied with the CfW activities they reported low level of interaction between Lebanese and Syrians thus not achieving an increase in positive social interactions or increasing their ability to work together. Some reports surfaced from Syrian refugees in CfW activities with host community members that power dynamics between supervisors and Syrian workers resulted in tensions. Providing orientation for supervisors to ensure respectful communication and conflict mitigation skills, and increasing interaction between workers, would assist in enabling positive social cohesion outcomes in CfW activities.

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