

Youth Services Sustainability in the Zaatari Refugee Camp

Bothaina Qamar

Summary

The eighth year of the Syrian crisis has witnessed a shift from a humanitarian emergency response to a protracted crisis response. As a result, radical adjustments were made to humanitarian funding allocated to support program interventions and youth services in the Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan. This funding cut placed the quality of services provided at risk, while programs themselves began to close down, without proper planning or consideration for their safe closure. The absence of youth services can impact negatively at the micro level (on youth and their communities), and can eventually cause a potential risk at the national level. This paper proposes to build on the efforts of humanitarian responses and best practices from the past nine years in youth services in the Zaatari camp, based on the humanitarian development nexus approach. This would engage multiple stakeholders through strengthening national grassroots involvement in youth services at the camp, adopting innovative approaches for funding streams and partnership models, and investing in Jordanian and Syrian youth leadership capacities.

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Jordan and Syrian Refugees

Jordan is a middle-income country, ranked 80 out of 188 countries.ⁱ Its population is almost 10 million, of whom 52.2 percent are aged under 25. A shift in the population age structure is leading to a demographic dividend,ⁱⁱ which is projected to peak by 2040 due to a reduction in the total fertility rate, late marriage, and the use of contraception. Realization of this projection, however, is only possible if demographic changes match economic opportunities for youth. While significant progress has been made on education and health, other areas lag behind, including poverty reduction, employment, gender parity, and the environment.ⁱⁱⁱ This is largely due to exogenous factors including global financial recession, regional instability, and the influx of refugees.

Jordan has accepted refugees from successive conflicts, evidenced by a non-Jordanian population of 3 million including refugees and immigrants. From 2011 on, the Syrian crisis changed Jordanian population dynamics and investments. Currently, Jordan hosts 1.3 million Syrians, of whom around 762,420 are UNHCR registered.^{iv} According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA),^v the large number of refugees is putting pressure on public services and systems. In parallel, the needs of vulnerable Jordanian citizens have grown rapidly, with increased competition for resources, straining the national government's ability to meet the needs of its citizens. The 2015 Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF)^{vi} found that 86 percent of refugees are now living below the Jordanian poverty line of 68 Jordanian Dinars per capita per month.

The Jordan demographic dividend is not only influenced by Jordanian youth. Children make up over half of all Syrian refugees in the country, with 322,395 registered Syrian refugees under the age of 18. Youth (defined by the UN as those aged 15-24) Syrian refugees total 128,181 in urban and camps settings.^{vii} The ongoing conflict has had deep implications for the lives of children and youth, and in the light of this, several UN agencies and international and national NGOs, with the support of Jordanian government, have been working to provide vital services that aim to minimize the negative impact of forced displacement on families and their children. These services include the provision of formal and informal educational programs, health services, water delivery, sanitation and hygiene promotion, livelihood protection programs, specialized case management for gender-based violence and

child protection programs for children with disabilities, and psychosocial support through child, youth, and adolescent friendly spaces, in addition to resilience building programming.

These services target refugees in the three formal camps and in various host communities. This paper will focus on the Zaatari camp, for two main reasons. First, youth services in Zaatari present a positive best practice that should be accompanied with a strategic exit strategy that utilizes previous years' efforts and achievements, and builds on lessons learnt and challenges. Second, the existence of the Youth Task Force under the Zaatari management structure, formed in 2014 to coordinate youth services in Zaatari and their work, includes annual updates and coordination for youth services in the camp. Access to such information on youth services contributes to this paper as a model for youth services in other camp contexts.

The Zaatari Camp and Youth

The Zaatari refugee camp, situated in the northern governorate of Al Mafraq, remains the largest refugee camp in Jordan with a population of more than 75,285 people.^{viii} According to the UNHCR, 19.6 percent of the population in Zaatari is aged between 15 and 24.^{ix} And according to REACH (2015), the vast majority of those aged 16-24 in Zaatari camp is currently unemployed (92.4 percent).^x Furthermore, 83.2 percent of youth aged 19-24 have not completed either high school or university. This displays the harsh reality experienced by a large segment of the refugee population who are left to deal with the lack of opportunities.

The humanitarian response in Zaatari was remarkable in terms of the quality, quantity, and innovation of youth services due to the stable and confined environment, as well as donor interest. Several youth services and projects were implemented as a response to the lack of educational services, jobs, and general opportunities for Syrian youth. A mapping exercise of services and projects for youth in Zaatari identified 53 centers, which makes Zaatari over-served compared to surrounding poor and vulnerable villages.^{xi} Youth services are specifically designed to support young people and their families to meet particular needs, and are often run from youth or community centers, schools, local councils, places of worship, or migrant and refugee Resource Centers.^{xii} Based on UNHCR 2017 data, it is estimated that more than 300 youth-focused activities are provided in Zaatari including sports, non-formal education, and life-skills capacity training with a special focus on child labor and child marriage.^{xiii} Other activities include youth committee awareness sessions, information technology, recreational activities, and vocational trainings.

Changes in Funding Patterns for Zaatari Camp Youth Services

The latest couple of years have witnessed a shift in the narrative concerning the Syrian crisis response: budget cuts are pushed and projects have been scaled down, indicating the end of this phase of the humanitarian program cycle. The Jordan Response Plan (JRP) to the Syria Crisis 2019-2020 was announced as Jordan's likely response. The development of the JRP into a resilience plan is still under discussion with the government.

While this natural development was expected, sustainability strategies are not clear when it comes to refugee services. Since the reopening of the border crossing at Jaber in October 2018, more Syrian refugees have started their journey back to Syria, totaling over 12,000 at the end of February 2019.^{xiv} While a notable increase, this constitutes only 2 percent of the Syrian refugees registered in Jordan, and many will stay in Jordan for a longer period of time, resulting in the need for support and access to services.

All youth services provided in Zaatari are addressed in the JRP under multiple sectors including protection, livelihood, and education. For 2018, Jordan response actors have only received 38.4 percent of the aid required to finance the JRP. According to the JRP's website, some \$954 million was delivered out of the total slightly exceeding \$2.5 billion for the year 2018.^{xv}

Financial cuts by the donor community have impacted youth services in Zaatari. The number of centers providing youth services dropped from 53 in 2017 to 37 in 2019. In the past year, the Youth Task Force (YTF) witnessed the impact of budget cuts on many active organizations, which ended up either scaling down services or shutting down centers. For example, UNFPA reduced the budget for the Questscope/UNFPA Youth Center by 25 percent in 2019 compared to the previous year. The Fundacion Promocion Social de la Cultura (FPSC), which worked with youth with disabilities around theater and empowerment, have left the camp and stopped their programming due to funding cuts. Other YTF members have unofficially reported budget cuts affecting their services. Gradual exit strategies and integration into public services are not yet clear or concrete.

Implications of Scaling Down Youth Services

Dropping the ball on supporting youth services can have serious implications for refugee youth, their surrounding communities, as well as at the national level. The youth sector can provide an important support system for young people experiencing transitions by facilitating their social inclusion, participation, and personal development, assisting with language and communication skills, teaching active engagement, and assisting with their emotional and psycho-cultural development and well-

being. Youth services can further ensure they are properly referred to specialized case management services when they face violence and abuse. Youth services have touched many Syrian refugee youth lives. Noor, a 17-year-old female Syrian refugee living in the Zaatari camp, said “I discovered my talents in the youth center by engaging in many activities. Please do not deprive us of them.”^{xvi}

Marginalization and disengagement among youth can have a negative impact on communities. If youth services are to be stripped from the program, young people will have nowhere to turn, and there will be no one qualified or trained to support them in the issues that they are experiencing.^{xvii} This will lead to more anti-social behavior, depression, and poor mental health among youth. Parents also need to know that their children are safe and not the victims of risky behaviors such as using drugs or being bullied. Youth centers are safe spaces where youth who are confined in one place are able to hang out, receive support, and seek out advice or mentoring as they see fit.^{xviii}

Government and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Response and Youth Services Provision

Recognizing the threat to stability and development posed by the rise of the radicalization of young people, the UN Security Council urges states under Resolution 2250 (2015)^{xix} to consider ways to create a meaningful voice for the youth in decision-making at the local, national, regional, and international levels. Jordan recognizes the importance behind meaningful engagement with youth at different levels. The National Youth Empowerment Strategy led by the Ministry of Youth (MoY) is a comprehensive seven-pillar strategy, providing a road map responding to youth challenges in Jordan. The strategy refers to targeting disadvantaged young people, which includes refugees, to achieve national development and security. Additionally, the MoY is the umbrella for the National Coalition on Youth Peace and Security 2250 in Jordan, whose vision is to play effective role in building and amplifying the momentum generated by Jordan’s past and present leadership in actualizing the 2250 agenda. Royal and national NGOs play a major role in complementing government programs, providing youth with services, and organizing diverse youth activities across the country. Religious and charitable organizations also provide support to Jordan’s most vulnerable youth groups. They are generally community-based and active at the local level, and most run local youth centers and organize extracurricular activities.^{xx} Most of these organizations do not have a presence in Zaatari due to the high presence of international humanitarian organizations.

The MoY is the government entity responsible for youth development and policies. Its role is to foster youth development and promote youth participation in national development processes. Yet the MoY does not have an active presence in refugee camps, which is due to the government position of not engaging the MoY in camp services. However, the current changes in humanitarian responses pose a question on the sustainability

of provided services, the normative and advisory role of the MoY on youth services, and the role the international community plays in supporting the national NGOs, local CBOs, and government in ensuring quality services for youth living in Jordan.

Several countries hosting refugees have worked on providing positive examples in supporting youth services. Most of the examples tackle host communities or operate at the policy or strategy level. Examples include the Council of Europe Action Plan on protecting refugee and migrant children (2017-2019),^{xxi} adopted by the Council of Ministers, and the 2015-2016 Erasmus+ inclusion and diversity strategy focused on disadvantaged youth, and the integration of migrants and refugees. Similarly, the EU Work Plan for Youth 2016-2018 focuses on the need for stronger cross-sectoral cooperation to address the challenges raised by increasing numbers of asylum seekers and their participation and social inclusion. In Malta, youth workers are encouraged through the new youth policy (2015-2020) to create social cohesion and the participation of asylum seekers aged 13-30, and to better integrate them into the activities of NGOs and community life.^{xxii} One example of government action comes from Greece, where the state is beginning to take over the management and financing of aspects of the reception and integration system.^{xxiii} Because of this, many international NGOs that came to assist with the humanitarian emergency are now downsizing or preparing to exit the country entirely.

However, no concrete examples that document sustainability for youth services in a refugee camp context are available. If given the chance, Jordan can be the first to develop a framework that will not only sustain services for refugees impacted in their own country, but also a framework that can be implemented in various contexts.

Recommendations

Like other vital public services, youth services should be as equally supported and diverse as the young people in Jordanian society. This paper proposes building on the efforts of humanitarian responses from the past nine years, and to strategically plan holistic youth service provisions that engage multiple stakeholders in ensuring sustained youth services that can serve also social cohesion.

- *Strengthen national grassroots involvement for youth services in the camp*
 - Role of international humanitarian actors and donors

International humanitarian actors and donors are encouraged to support active implementation of the humanitarian-development nexus approach^{xxiv} by engaging with more local organizations and actors, as well as the Jordanian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation and the UNHCR, to facilitate national specialized youth NGOs presence in Zaatari. This can help support the transition process technically and

financially, and utilize national capacities in youth service provision. Similar interventions have recently been initiated by the UNHCR for general services in the camp, in collaboration with the Crown Prince Foundation, Queen Rania Foundation, and Ruwad Al Tanmya. This transitional process will require international support in terms of funding and technical expertise for national counterparts. This is particularly needed in terms of working with refugee populations to better understand their vulnerability and legal context.

➤ Role of the Youth Task Force in the Zaatari Camp

The process of national transition and building integration of public services should start from a grassroots level. The Youth Task Force and camp management should facilitate discussion around the transition process, and assess national organizations' willingness, challenges, and capacities in engaging in the humanitarian response and youth services provision. Decentralization law provides an outlet to engage with the local community and decision makers in Mafraq, and create a channel with Syrian refugees. This process should be informed by clear assessments conducted by the Youth Task Force in the Zaatari camp that describe the youth services scene, and identify existing models that should be sustained as well as duplicate services that can be merged. The UNHCR is leading a community mapping assessment for community-based organizations in the Mafraq area; the findings could help in identifying local service providers for transition activities.

➤ Role of the Ministry of Youth

The MoY can engage in an advisory role as the official umbrella for youth work in Jordan, setting the normative standards in this area. The Greek example provides a model in which the government transitions to humanitarian services, and adoption of this could be explored further by the Jordanian government. In order to promote social cohesion and successful integration, the Greek government is working on engaging all stakeholders, including relevant ministries, mayors, municipalities, civil society, host community groups, and representatives of the asylum-seeking and refugee communities in the design of a strategic social inclusion/integration plan, and in the planning and implementation of integration measures.

• *Adopting innovative approaches for funding streams and partnerships models*

Innovative approaches in utilizing pool funding under future national resilience plans should be utilized. Youth services should be responsive to youth needs and provided on equitable bases. Joint projects and programs could decrease operational costs and enhance efficiency. This can entail the merging of more than one service and the provision of "One-stop shops" in several physical locations that provide holistic services for youth, instead of scattered interventions. One example is the "Mobile Youth Centers" that are sensitive to young girls' accessibility constraints,

and reach out to neglected geographical areas in the camp. Such merges can lead to the reduction of management expenses and operational costs carried by different organizations, and ensure continued service provision.

Another dimension is engaging with the private sector and philanthropists who are interested in supporting youth programming, not only as sources of funding, but also as partners engaged in joint programming. Many companies and organizations are already supporting youth focus programming such as Zain, Orange, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, and many others. For example, Zain is supporting ZINC labs all over Jordan promoting youth innovation and social and business enterprise. International organizations should support local capacities to mobilize new sources of funding, and build partnerships with private sector organizations engaged in youth work and youth services.

- *Investing in Jordanian and Syrian youth leadership capacities*

The current legal framework limits and restricts Syrian refugees from forming civil society organizations. However, cooperatives can be founded among Syrians in collaboration with Jordanian counterparts. Humanitarian actors should mobilize advocacy efforts to discuss alternatives with the Ministry of Social Development and MoY for Syrian leadership within the camp, granting them more agency to create sustainable solutions for youth services.

The process should be inclusive for both Syrian refugee youth in the camp and Jordanian youth in surrounding areas. Both Jordanian and Syrian youth carry strong sets of skills and assets. Programs and interventions built on an assets-based approach and skills exchange will not only translate into productivity, but also enhance social cohesion and building strong communities. Many youth services in Zaatari have relied on local Syrian capacities throughout the years. Youth workers from the Syrian refugee community in Zaatari have been trained to provide high-quality services. Examples include handling management processes in centers and services such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, International Relief and Development, and Questscope. Similarly, many Jordanian youth are engaged in the humanitarian response, youth work, and activism, in addition to their legal access to many opportunities and services.

Working together with Jordanian and Syrian youth towards creating sustainable structures should adopt comprehensive capacity building on proposal writing, fundraising and resource mobilization, project management, and so on. Income-generating modalities from within the camp could be one supporting stream for service provision. Although the camp is currently closed with movement restrictions for both Jordanians and Syrians, this paper proposes working toward a pioneer model in service provision for all Syrian youth in Zaatari, and Jordanians in the surrounding areas. The vision is to increase the platforms of engagement



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between Jordanians and Syrians, and provide opportunities and services for vulnerable youth from different backgrounds.

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Notes

- i “Human Development Report 2015,” UNDP
<http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf> (accessed July 29, 2019).
- ii The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) defines demographic dividend as “the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population’s age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (14 and younger, and 65 and older).” “Demographic Dividend,” United Nations Population Fund
<<https://www.unfpa.org/demographic-dividend>> (accessed July 29, 2019).
- iii “Jordan MDG Report 2015,” internal UN document.
- iv UNHCR Jordan Fact Sheet, 2019
<http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR_percent20Jordan_percent20Fact_percent20Sheet_percent20-percent20February_percent202019.pdf> (accessed July 12, 2019).
- v “Country program document 2017,” internal UNFPA document.
- vi “Jordan 2015 Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF),”
<<http://www.coordinationtoolkit.org/?p=1748>> (accessed July 12, 2019).
- vii Figures from UNHCR Operations Portal, 2019
<<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36>> (accessed July 29, 2019).
- viii UNHCR Registration Data and 3RP-Monitor, 2019
<<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/53>> (accessed July 12, 2019).
- ix Ibid.
- x “Comprehensive Child Focused Assessment - Za’atari Refugee Camp,” REACH, June 2015
<<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Comprehensiv e%20child%20focused%20assessment%20Zaatari%20refugee%20camp.pdf>> (accessed July 29, 2019).
- xi Youth Task Force presentations, unpublished, 2017.
- xii “Transforming Youth Work,” UK Department for Education and Skills, 2001 <<https://www.cyc-net.org/pdf/youthservice.pdf>> (accessed July 12, 2019).
- xiii “Initial findings of youth activities baseline assessment,” UNHCR, unpublished, 2017.
- xiv Stefano Severe, “Support essential to Syrian refugees’ voluntary return,” *The Jordan Times*, March 10, 2019