INSIGHTS INTO SYRIAN REFUGEES’ PERCEPTION
ON RECENT GOVERNMENT DECISIONS

A. INTRODUCTION

For the past year, the protection space of Syrian refugees’ has been shrinking. The issuance of decisions and plans on deportation, combatting illegal foreign work and evictions (hereinafter referred to as “Decisions”) have resulted in a set of new and evolving challenges.

In the past, refugees have lamented the lingering lack of knowledge around laws and regulations and the lack of services around legal aid. Is that also the case on the Decisions issued in 2019? Are refugees aware of the governmental policies? How accurate is their level of knowledge? What impact does their knowledge or lack thereof have? These are important questions because, in this environment of shrinking protection space, refugees’ knowledge will become ever more critical as important decisions might be based on erroneous facts. The viewpoints of refugees is especially vital to the continued relevance of the protection services. To help DRC better prepare for this challenge, the legal aid team began a comprehensive effort in September 2019 to gain an in-depth understanding of the awareness around Decisions and impact thereof.

B. METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

DRC polled refugees of all ages, as well as Shawich and focal points in October and November 2019, to gauge how each group thinks about a number of key issues and identify where we must work to improve the living conditions of refugees.

To conduct the qualitative research, DRC chose to use focus group discussions in Bekaa (Marj) and the North (Wadi Jamouss and Bhannin) and key informant interviews as methods of data collection. Sixteen (16) Shawich from the areas of Bhannin, Mouhammara, Wadi Jamous and Marj took part in the focus group discussions. The number of FGDs was limited to three owing to the nationwide protests and civil unrest that started on October 17, 2019. Six (6) Shawich from the areas of Baalback, Deir El Ahmar, Britel, Siaide and Iaat (all in North Bekaa) were interviewed.

To conduct the quantitative research, DRC’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) team completed the legal perception survey with 401 beneficiaries (100 in T5, 100 in Akkar, 106 in North Bekaa, 22 in West Bekaa and 73 in Central Bekaa).

C. KEY FINDINGS

Lack of knowledge around issuance of Decisions touching on Syrian Refugees. Most refugees are unaware of the issuance of Decisions. Only 44% (43% in the North and 44% in the Bekaa) of respondents knew that Lebanese authorities issued Decisions touching on Syrian refugees during the year 2019, with another 44% (55% in the North and 30% in the Bekaa) answering that no decisions had been issued, and 12% (2% in the North and 26% in the Bekaa) reporting not knowing. Likewise, little over half of the Shawich who
took part in the focus group discussions stated that Lebanese authorities issued decisions during the year 2019. Conversely, all of the six interviewees reported knowing that the Lebanese government issued decisions in 2019 touching on Syrians. Given that all of these 6 Shawich reside in North Bekaa, this could be the result of good knowledge around issuance of decisions in this particular area. Moreover, Shawich are usually more knowledgeable in decisions reportedly because of their close ties to Lebanese armed forces who visit them frequently for information collection purposes.

Did the Lebanese authorities issue any regulation touching on refugees?

The lack of knowledge can be due to the sector decision to avoid spreading information that might scare refugees, or be negatively interpreted by the Lebanese government on the issue of deportation. Nevertheless, the year 2019 saw the issuance of positive decisions on birth registration (September 2019) and changing sponsors (July and October 2019). Ignorance around positive decisions also evidences the gaps in information sharing with refugees.

Respondents to the survey knowing that decisions were issued selected one or more topic they knew about. However, very few people knew of all the decisions issued in 2019. Accordingly, 68% of respondents stated that regulations on labor laws were issued, followed by deportation (27%) and legal stay (26%), then exit regulations (14%). Other topics were also listed such as birth registration (4%), marriage registration (2% all in the North) and rent (2%).

It is believed that the high level of awareness on the Ministry of Labor plan ("MoL Plan") is the result of the considerable impact that the MoL Plan had on refugees (termination of employment, shops’ closure, etc.). The numbers evidence that the level of awareness in Bekaa on deportation decision is considerably higher than in the North (53% of respondents in Bekaa knew that a deportation decision was issued in comparison with 1% in the North). Respondents reported that they know of decisions mostly through word of mouth (34% in the North and 70% in the Bekaa), followed by the media (33% in the North and 67% in the Bekaa). It can be concluded that many deportations took place in the Bekaa, although information on where refugees who were deported were residing is not shared by UNHCR or GSO.

Regulations around exit to Syria were issued in the year 2018 and might have come to the knowledge of refugees in 2019. Same applies for birth registration (major decision issued in 2018 and an extension thereof in 2019). Although decisions on marriage registration were not issued in 2019 – the last one dates back from 2017 - foreigners’ registry started accepting as of March 2019 the registration of birth upon presentation

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1 We are unaware of the areas where deportees were living.
of a marriage certificate executed in Lebanon and registered by the Syrian embassy instead of the family booklet that was required.

Answers of attendees of focus group discussions and interviewees around knowledge of Decisions and topics of Decisions were roughly similar to the survey, to the exception of one difference on eviction decisions. Almost half of the Shawich stated that decisions on eviction were issued in 2018 and 2019, while none of the respondents knew of eviction decisions. Given that raids and decisions on evictions are being enforced by the Lebanese Armed Forces ("LAF"), one could think that the communication between LAF, Shawich and refugees is distorted.

**Beneficiaries' knowledge of the Decisions issued by Lebanese authorities in 2019**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>Bekaa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deportation</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent Law</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage Registration</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth Registration</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Stay</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit regulations</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Law</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Erroneous knowledge on Deportation Decision.** The vast majority of respondents to the survey, interviewees and Shawich have a false understanding of the deportation decision. Out of the people who knew that Decisions were issued in 2019, 15% in the North and 35% in the Bekaa believed that decisions state that all Syrians residing in Lebanon without legal stay will be deported, 5% in the North and 1% in the Bekaa believed that all Syrians who entered Lebanon after the 24th of April will be deported and only 5% in the North correctly reported that only those who entered Lebanon irregularly after the 24th of April will be deported. None of the respondents in Bekaa had complete and true information on the deportation decision. 21% of the respondents in the Bekaa claimed that there’s a decision to deport all Syrians from Lebanon. Results from interviews and focus group discussions are similar to the survey.

We were informed in focus group discussions that many people have been choosing to return back to Syria as a result of the deportation decision, perceiving this as less risky that returning through the deportation
route. Therefore, it can be concluded that some refugees are making the decision to return to Syria based on erroneous information.

**Gaps in knowledge of MoL Plan.** Of the people who knew that Decisions were issued in 2019, 46% in the North and 40% in the Bekaa correctly believe that Syrian workers should obtain work permits and 24% in the North and 36% in the Bekaa correctly reported that shops owned by Syrians are illegal. However, 39% in the North and 59% in the Bekaa mistakenly believe that Syrians are no longer allowed to work in Lebanon. Therefore, over half of the people who have knowledge of the MoL Plan have not understood the Lebanese framework specified in the MoL Plan thinking that Syrians are no longer allowed to do any kind of work on the Lebanese territories, which increases the sentiment of helplessness, hinders their search for work and might push them to return back to Syria. Conversely, the results from interviews and focus group discussions evidence good knowledge of the Lebanese legal framework on foreign work by Shawich. The good level of awareness could be the result of Shawich special relationships with Lebanese employers, given that oftentimes they link refugees to employers.

**Lack of knowledge on demolition and eviction decisions.** None of the respondents to the survey stated that decisions on evictions were recently issued. Roughly 75% of respondents to the survey live in ITs. Lack of knowledge by respondents can be explained by the lack of power of refugees who don’t question the basis of decisions greatly impacting their lives and who hugely rely on Shawich to sort things out with Lebanese authorities. In the interviews and focus group discussions it was observed that the majority of Shawich know of decisions on eviction and the brick limit requirement. Rules around eviction differ from North to Bekaa. In Central Bekaa refugees are not allowed to add or transfer tents. Once a tent is vacated, they have to destroy it. Conversely, such rules were not mentioned in the North.

**Negative Impact of Decisions.** The vast majority of respondents aware of the Decisions mentioned that the impact of the said Decisions is negative (98% of respondents aware of these decisions in the North and 67% in the Bekaa believed that there is an impact on them and their family members, with 1% in the North and 27% in the Bekaa believing that there is no impact and 1% in the North and 6% in the Bekaa did not know). Of those believing that there is an impact, 97% in the North and 98% in the Bekaa perceived it as negative, 2% as positive in the North and 1% in the North and 2% in the Bekaa did not know. No participant from the Bekaa thinks that the impact of Decisions is positive.
Did Decisions Impact your Lives and/or your Families?

From the FGD and interviews it could be concluded that the negative impact is mainly the result of the MoL Plan. Sharwich and refugee respondent informed that warnings were issued, people were laid off work, salaries were unpaid and shops were closed. As a result, unemployment rates drastically increased. A small positive impact was mentioned by a Shawich in Akkar area who stated that he heard of a small number of refugees who were sponsored as a result of the MoL Plan.

On eviction, we were informed that people are living in the imminent fear of raids despite compliance with building rules, because they believe that the army can use any justification to conduct raids.

On the threat of deportation, the majority of Shawich stated that the impact has not been a major impediment on the movement of refugees as they have no choice but to continue to move for employment to provide for their families. However, they had heard of people who were deported and disappeared in Syria following deportation. Additionally they reported that many families chose to return back to Syria as a result of the deportation decision.

The results of the survey show that the number one impact of the 2019 Decisions is decrease in income (53% of those perceiving a negative impact in the North and 59% in the Bekaa), followed by reduction in work opportunities (51% in the North and 42% in the Bekaa). Reduction in freedom of movement was also a major impact listed (45% of respondents in the North and 19% in the Bekaa perceived it as an impact on all the family and 31% in the North and 27% in the Bekaa perceived it as an impact only on themselves). Additionally, 8% in the North and 17% in the Bekaa mentioned that the work was halted for days/weeks/months and 2% in the North and 5% in the Bekaa reported that they had an impact on shelter- they had to move, had to rebuild, or were made homeless. Also, 7% of the beneficiaries in the North reported resorting to new methods to make money (mainly debt and one mentioned having to withdraw child from school). Respondents, Shawich and interviewees also listed other negative impacts encountered such as fear, increase in racism, non-payment of salaries, increase in employer’s exploitation, fear of circulation, detention, inability to obtain needed documents, inability to renew residency and inability to register children.
Simplification of birth registration procedure is the only positive impact that was mentioned by one person only.

**Negative Coping Mechanisms.** Almost all those perceiving that the Decisions resulted in a negative impact listed more than one impact. This means that respondents that Decisions affected refugees on different dimensions.

To cope with the Decisions, the following negative mechanisms were mentioned in focus group discussions and interviews:

- Re-entry of deported people to Lebanon through irregular routes putting their lives in danger.
- Return to Syria to avoid humiliation and arrest, especially but not limited to women and children.
- Increasing reliance on debt.
- Agricultural work for adults.
- Hazardous child labour\(^2\) including begging and agricultural works, and garbage collection.
- Working in the illicit drug trade.
- Moving to the Bekaa to work in agriculture.
- Moving from Deir el Ahmar because of raids and curfews.
- Moving to smaller houses.
- Overcrowding due to living with other families in the same house to share the rent.

**D. RECOMMENDED ACTIONABLE POINTS**

1. **Increase legal outreach to refugees’.**
   Gaps in information between shawich and the community is witnessed and hence over reliance on Shawich and key informants to spread awareness could be overrated.

2. **Provide refugees’ with quality and updated information.**
   The majority of respondents are unaware of any Decision issued in 2019, including positive decisions.

3. **Discuss mitigation measures to return decisions based on erroneous facts.**
   Sharing information on returns and the Lebanese government hostile policy is complicated and controversial because it could be a push factor for return, and potentially undermine advocacy measures underway to install a due process to this procedure with the Lebanese Government. Nevertheless, some refugees who can safely stay in Lebanon because they have entered before the 24th of April or through regular routes after that date are returning back to Syria. Although we believe that number of returnees because of the deportation decision is low, it is worth discussing mitigation measures with field teams and coordination bodies to create trust linkages with refugees

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\(^2\) Child labor also increased as a result of UNHCR cutting on transportation to schools.
and physical presence such as legal aid clinics so they can brainstorm on their decisions with field teams.

4. **Advocate for simplification of procedure and reduction of costs for obtaining work permits.**
   Obtaining work permits is cumbersome, requires submission of documents and is costly (especially in the current deteriorating economic situation).

5. **Increase focus PSS, case management and cash to reduce the negative consequences of child labor.**