



Advancing Alternative Migration Governance



Dwelling in emergency. The effect of the COVID 19 pandemic on Syrians displaced in Lebanon

Maria Gabriella Trovato
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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Displaced Syrians in Lebanon	6
3. Methods	8
4. COVID—19 effects on Syrians displaced	8
5. Syrians response to the COVID-19 pandemic	11
5.1 Lockdown	11
5.2 Social Distancing	12
5.3 Health measures	12
6. Conclusion	13
7. References	13

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CAMALEON	Cash, Monitoring Evaluation, Accountability & Learning, Organizational Network
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COVID – 19	Corona Virus Disease
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
ECDC	European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
GoL	Governemnt of Lebanon
GSO	Genral Security Office
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
HRW	Human Right Watch
ICLA	Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance
ITS	Informal Tented Settlements
LPC	Lebanon Protection Consortium
MoL	Ministry of Labour
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PHC	Primary Health Center
PIN-SK	People in Need – Slovakia
SEED	Socio-Economic Enhancement and Development
SI	Solidarités International
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WaSH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Introduction

On 30th January 2020, the WHO declared the Chinese outbreak of COVID—19 to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern posing a high risk to countries with vulnerable health systems. The emergency committee has stated that the spread of COVID—19 may be interrupted by early detection, isolation, prompt treatment, and the implementation of a robust system to trace contacts (World Health Organization, 2020). Although Lebanon reacted promptly to the emergency caused by the pandemic, COVID—19 exacerbated an already devastated and precarious economic situation the country is facing since October 2019. Indeed it revealed the inadequacies of Lebanon's social protection system (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Social inequalities in informal settings around the world could diminish the capacities of communities to cope with and actively respond to the spread of a pandemic. In Lebanon, displaced Syrians are one of the most deprived communities living in the country. Spread over more than 1700 locations, 1.5 million Syrians inhabit overcrowded unfinished residential buildings and informal tented settlements (Fig.1). They rent flats, garages, ruins and spaces in half-constructed houses, and set up makeshift Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs) in agricultural fields with approximately 42,000 illegal tents (ITs) scattered throughout Lebanon (Fig.2). Moreover, in compliance with the Government of Lebanon (GoL) orders, non-essential humanitarian programming under the LPC - Lebanon Protection Consortium has been put on hold or shifted to remote modalities. This includes the regular community-level assessments and NRC's Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programme, which is now implemented over the phone for all but urgent protection cases (LPC, 2020).

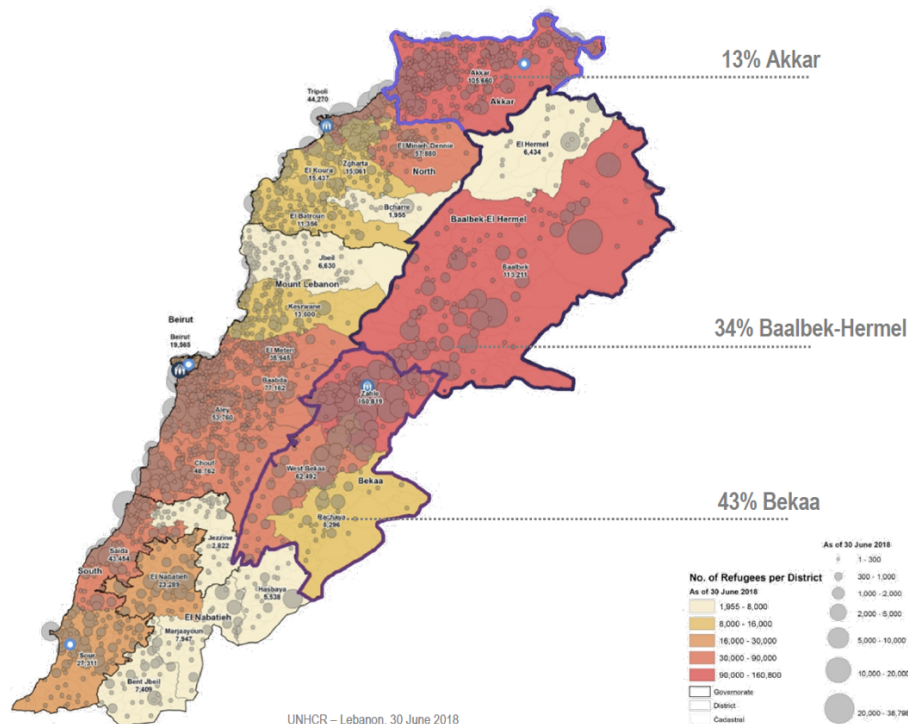


Fig.1. Syrians registered as refugees by UNHCR living in Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs)

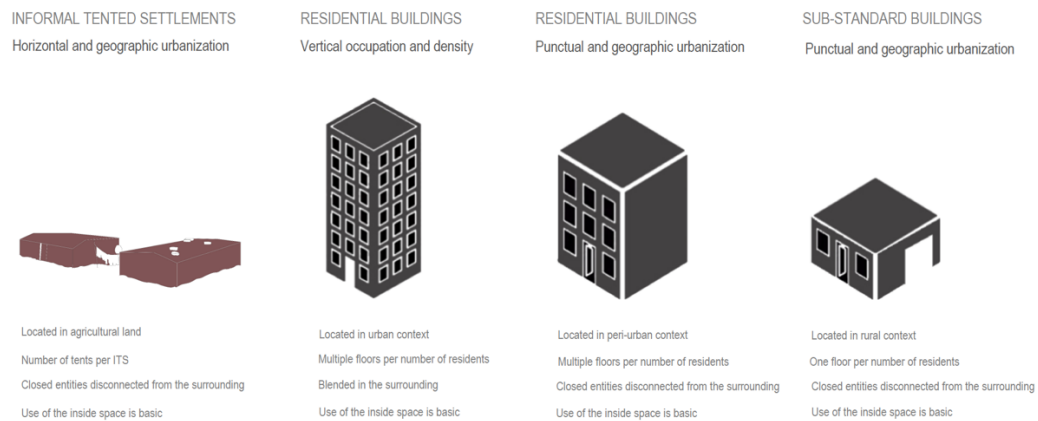


Fig. 2. Typologies of Syrians' informal settlements in Lebanon

To date, there is no evidence of COVID—19 community transmission amongst displaced Syrians in Lebanon. This perhaps casts shadows of doubt on the absence of outbreaks or cases in the camps. Indeed, there are suggestions that the refugees might not be reporting infections due to 1) lack of knowledge in regards to infection and symptoms, 2) lack of access to tests, which are already limited and insufficient for the needs of the hosting communities, and 3) fear of stigma which might lead to increased restrictions and crackdown on the refugees (Kassem, 2020). Nonetheless, the arrival of Coronavirus in an already deteriorated country situation has exacerbated the situation contributing to the erosion of resilience among the Syrian population in Lebanon (Solidarités International, 2020). Preliminary analysis of the impact of COVID-19 isolation measures on households' standard of living in urban Beirut suburbs indicates that some of the poorest households are likely to fall below the survival threshold, with the inability to cover basic costs including food, hygiene items, water, gas, rent and public electricity (Save the Children et al., 2020).

This paper reports on displaced Syrians response to the pandemic highlighting the repercussions on the protection and livelihoods of this deprived community. It was developed as a result of a comprehensive desk review for available secondary data. Thematic reports, policy briefs, peer-reviewed articles, and fact sheets are some of the literature that was reviewed due to the impossibility of conducting fieldwork and data collection.

2. Displaced Syrians in Lebanon

Lebanon hosts the highest number of displaced people per capita in the world, with some 1.5 million Syrians in addition to a large community of Palestinian refugees (UN, Government of Lebanon, 2019). Although refugees and others of concern to UNHCR have the right to adequate shelter - to protection from the elements, to a space in which they can live and store belongings, and to privacy, comfort and emotional security (UNHCR, 2017), Syrians are dispersed throughout the country, with 80% of the displaced in Lebanon living below the country's poverty line. They dwell in degraded neighbourhoods, are obliged to accept dangerous and underpaid jobs, and frequently have to face a social climate of prejudice and hostility (Mountz, 2011).

Referred to as a 'displaced population', Syrians in Lebanon are a vulnerable group that are denied access to housing, land, and property (HLP) rights. Albeit HLP are crucial rights for rebuilding the lives of uprooted people, Syrians, that are constrained in a condition of permanent temporariness, appropriate spaces and deploy a range of spatial and citizenship practices to strategically navigate their position (Hammett, 2017). The comfort of spatial identity in the Lebanese informal-scape is partly provided by the reconstruction and reshaping of vernacular landscapes of the region of origins in Syria and by the reorganization of space's hierarchy to recreate the familiar landscape (Fig. 4). The fears over the potential militarization of camps, the radicalization of Syrian refugees and the potential permanence of their presence have led the Lebanese Government to a rejection of formal camps (Turner, 2015). As a consequence, thousands of informal tented settlement (ITS) materialized all over the country with refugees living in overcrowded conditions in makeshift shelter clusters. The inside space is manipulated and adapted to the necessities of the occupants and transformed into a temporary home. This progressive shaping and re-adaptation of the space testify to the inhabitants' effort to reproduce the residential fabric of their original villages with their socio-spatial organization and division between public and/or private, open and/or closed.



Fig.4. Re-creation of familiar landscape inside the Syrians Informal Tented Settlements

ITSs in Lebanon are spaces that emerged in the place of formal camps – through the collusion of private interests, state acquiescence and humanitarian aid. They have emerged with the tacit approval of the state – under the conditions of a 'crisis' where the state is both unable and unwilling to shoulder the burden of refugees (Sanyal, 2017). Both Lebanon and Syria have historically shared a relatively open border, which has made crossing into Lebanon a far easier process than migrating into Jordan, which also shares a land-border with Syria. The two countries, Syrian and Lebanon, have also had a long and contentious history, and Syrian workers have, over the years, come to Lebanon to work in agriculture, construction and other trades (Sanyal, 2017). Syrians have capitalized on historical networks of migration and employment, and since their arrival in Lebanon

preferred the independence and the opportunities offered by Lebanon's cities (Fábos and Kibreab, 2007; Grabska 2006) and rural informal encampments.

3. Methods

We reviewed secondary data from literature and reports focusing on Syrians' responses to the COVID—19 pandemic and coping mechanisms. We visited databases of international humanitarian organizations (UNHCR, NRC, DRC, International RESCUE..) and reporting on the humanitarian response to the pandemic. Limitations include the impossibility of conducting fieldwork, time constraints in reaching Syrian communities by phone or online and changing statistics due to the unpredictability of the situation.

4. COVID -19 effects on Sysrians displaced

In mid-March, the Lebanese Government imposed a lockdown in a bid to combat and prevent the pandemic in the country. The related restrictions on movement and social distancing measures have severely impacted the already vulnerable condition of displaced Syrians, disrupting their livelihoods and access to support. The shortcomings of social distancing orders and lockdown are evident in most of the vulnerable districts in Lebanon where communities feel their lives have been upended with little protection or access to support. Counselling and Legal Assistance programme are now implemented over the phone for all but urgent protection cases (LPC, 2020). Food and cash assistance are not available anymore, causing a deterioration of the capacities of the Syrians displaced to provide to the most vulnerable members of the community. They are surviving day to day while living in dense and overcrowded neighbourhoods, and sharing access to basic services like water, sanitation and electricity. Syrian's most common concerns are economic with the vast majority of them having lost jobs and daily income and the inability to meet the monthly rent. Claims are high for what humanitarian assistance there is, with food, cash and the distribution of hygiene items as a priority (SI, 2020).

For an initial assessment of the impact of COVID—19 on displaced Syrians, we referred to March, April and May 2020 reports and newspapers. In compliance with the Government's directive, several International organizations active in Lebanon conducted phone surveys in selected ITs located in areas covered by humanitarian NGOs. The results of the phone interviews carried on in March and April by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Solidarité Internationale, Lebanon Protection Consortium (LPC), Camaleon, were assessed. The impact of the measures adopted by the Lebanese Government were compared looking at their effects on Syrians' protection and health.

NRC conducted 50 key informant phone surveys in ITs located in 7 municipalities (Ablah, Fourzol, Nabil Chit, Nasriyet Rizk, Serrain, Saadnayel and Bednayel) in Central and North Bekaa. The majority of the questionnaires revolved around perceptions, concerns and priorities linked to COVID—19. (NRC, 2020).

Solidarités International (SI) undertook a phone survey from a purposive sample of 57 households located in SI's area of coverage. The selection included households from a

range of ITSs that varied both in geographical location and the overall number of inhabitants. The ITSs were mostly located in Akkar (49%) and Bekaa (35%). The survey explored awareness, effects, concerns, preparedness, response and treatment (SI, 2020). Socio-Economic Enhancement and Development (SEED) and People in Need – Slovakia (PIN-SK) conducted remote individual phone-interviews with a representative sample of 50 persons in Tripoli that were already receiving assistance from them prior to the COVID—19 pandemic (SEED et al. 2020).

The Lebanon Protection Consortium (LPC) agencies (Action Against Hunger, Gruppo di Volontariato Civile, and Norwegian Refugee Council), between 17 to 20 March 2020, conducted 131 phone interviews with communities representatives, WaSH committee members and other ITS residents from 90 ITS. The Informal Tented Settlements were located in Akkar, Bekaa, Aarsal, Ghazze and the North (Lebanon Protection Consortium, 2020).

A series of below listed indicators were set to compile and compare the information collected from the different sources. It aims at obtaining an overall picture of the consequences of the virus on the vulnerable community of Syrians displaced.

- Social Tension

(data retrieved from DRC, HRW, and SEED reports)

Discrimination, stigmatization and Syrians being subject to bullying are increasing tensions between host and hosted communities since March 2020. 22% of the respondents feel there is a change in the relations between locals and Syrians (DRC, 2020). Since refugees are perceived as a treath to the community's health, the curfew imposed at the National level has being extended to constrain and limit Syrians mobility outside the ITSs. At least 18 municipalities in the Bekaa valley – where nearly a third of all Syrian refugees in Lebanon live – have mandated restrictions other than curfews that only target the refugee population. In Bar Elias, for example, refugees must appoint someone to procure and provide for the basic needs of their informal tented settlement and coordinate such movements with the municipality (Human Right Watch, 2020). Restrictions on access to villages and towns, financial penalties for not wearing masks or gloves, and confiscation of vehicles to limit movement options Are some of the additional measures imposed on Syrians' community (DRC et al, 2020).

At the community-level, 64% of the respondents reported discrimination in access to services, resources and opportunities. An increase in exacerbated challenges with local authorities such as harassment and arbitrary arrest and detention was recounted by 42% of the interviewes as well as land/house eviction voiced by 30% are major protection concerns resulting from the pandemic and the lockdown (SEED et al. 2020).

- Livelihood

(data retrieved from SI, and HRW reports)

Livelihood refers to “how people access and mobilize resources enabling them to increase their economic security, thereby reducing the vulnerability created and exacerbated by conflict, and how they pursue goals necessary for survival and possible return” (Jacobsen, 2002; Amirthalingam & Laksham, 2009). Syrian refugees in Lebanon face an ongoing deterioration in their socio-economic conditions. The country's desperate economic crisis is exacerbating their unsustainable living. Refugees used to rely on social capital, resources that are embedded in social networks, to manage their experience of protracted

displacement. The availability of a group network allows Syrians in Lebanon to reduce the cost of rent finding more affordable accommodation, or to improve their livelihoods by looking after each other's children, thus allowing parents to work (Uzelac et al., 2018). Furthermore, the social network decreases the vulnerability of the individual strengthening his/her position towards exploitative or unreliable employers or landlords.

The COVID-19 and related lockdown measures disrupted the social network of Syrian communities generating unbearable difficulties for them to navigate and manage their livelihoods. Social distancing orders are disrupting and cutting down the bonding and bridging, key components for the effective use of social capital, making individuals and families more vulnerable. Social gathering between households in ITS have been reduced. Syrians ability to generate an income had been negatively affected by the pandemic with 74% of those interviewed by SI saying that they have lost income and therefore, their ability to pay monthly rent (SI, 2020). The COVID-19 induced surge in unemployment has already led at least 21 Lebanese municipalities to introduce discriminatory restrictions against Syrian refugees that do not apply to Lebanese residents – ostensibly to fight the Coronavirus (Human Right Watch, 2020).

- Safety

(data retrieved from Inter-Agency Coordination, and SEED reports)

Community-level: an increase in discrimination has been identified. Compared to January – September 2019, beneficiaries' access to safe spaces has decreased on average by 34% in the last quarter of 2019. Factors that can explain this situation include roadblocks, intermittent closure of services, self- and imposed restriction of movements, fear of arrests and harassments, and the shift of priorities more towards survival due to the deteriorating economic situation (Inter-Agency Coordination, 2020).

Informal Tented Settlements level: At the household level, 90% of respondents declared that the pandemic and the lockdown had affected relations between the household's members (both positive and negative). Of them, 100% agreed that the current situation is exacerbating tensions within the household. In addition, 12% disclosed an increase in intimate partner violence, 29% an increase in violence towards children and 8% a rise in neglect of children (SEED et al. 2020).

- Eviction

The rise in the politicization of the refugee question and community tensions also greatly affected refugees' protection, including increased collective evictions. Access to the Lebanese territory for Syrians continues to be limited by strictly identified visa and residency categories, with the registration of refugees still suspended. Following governmental decisions, displaced Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria –men, women and children– found to have entered Lebanon irregularly after 24 April 2019 have been subject to deportation and handed over to the Syrian immigration authorities (Inter-Agency Coordination, 2020).

- Health

In many cases, the refugees, including children, elderly, and immunocompromised individuals, have comparatively limited access to extended medical help, clean water, and safe and nutritious food, resulting in a chronically stressed population that is prone to various communicable and non-communicable diseases (Kassem, 2020).

UNHCR subsidizes the costs of basic medical care for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Testing and treatment for COVID—19 are currently free at the Rafik Hariri University Hospital (RHUH) in Beirut for authorized individuals following a call to and subsequent screening by the Health Ministry's hotline (Human Right Watch, 2020).

The vast majority of respondents to the NRC phone survey reported having access to a Primary Health Center (PHC). The main barriers mentioned accessing health centres were financial (50% unable to pay medical and transport fees, 48%). Generally, the service was reported to be average or good, but there were some fears of not being treated for being Syrian and fears of the PHC being too crowded and fears of stigmatization for living in unhygienic ITSS. (NRC, 2020).

Self-isolation: 70% of households that were interviewed by Solidarités International reported that they would not be able to effectively self-isolate. When asked for the primary reason why they could not, 88% of households stated that their tent does not have the space to isolate a single person from other household members. 8% reported that the primary barrier to self-isolation would be that they must work to have an income, while a further 5% reported that household duties would prevent self-isolation (SI, 2020).

- Mental health

The pandemic and the lockdown are having critical consequences on vulnerable people's mental health and psychosocial well-being. Based on SEED report, around 80% of respondents declared that the household's adults are experiencing an increase in stress and anxiety, fear, and sadness. More than 50% highlighted an increased feeling of loneliness and hopelessness. Furthermore, 84% of respondents declared that the household's children feel increasingly sad due to the current situation. 28% of children have an increased feeling of stress and anxiety, and 16% are experiencing fear. (SEED et al. 2020).

5. Syrians response to the COVID – 19 pandemic

Lockdown, Social distancing, and Hygiene measures are the most widely used expedients adopted by countries all over the world to prevent the spread of the virus. Across the globe, similar public health measures have profound implications for the livelihoods of millions of people, especially for vulnerable and displacement-affected populations. Lebanon's situation is compounded because of the layering of the pandemic onto the ongoing economic crisis, and the political instability experienced throughout 2019 and 2020 (Durable Solutions Platform et al., 2020).

The vast majority of the respondents to the several phone call interviews have taken measures to cope with and respond to the pandemic. They are avoiding crowds, gathering and external contacts, and are emphasizing personal hygiene and sanitation.

5.1 Lockdown

In Lebanon, the lockdown has been imposed already five consecutive times due to the spike of the Coronavirus cases. At the National level, the curfew is between 7pm and 5am, but several municipalities have implemented more restrictive timing to Syrians limiting their possibility of shopping or buying medicines. In certain areas, the limitation has also been imposed on humanitarian aid workers impeding their ability to reach and help the vulnerable population. These measures have severely impacted Syrian livelihoods. The

immediate effects are: an increase in the numbers of illegal people¹; loss of work opportunities and related loss of income-generation. Since the beginning of the Syrian displacement, the Ministry of Labor (MoL) has issued increasingly restrictive policies that have limited the scope of livelihood interventions addressing the economic situation of refugees (Durable Solutions Platform and Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2020). However, to limit the outbreak of COVID—19, the General Security Office (GSO) has halted the processing of residency and work permit applications (Durable Solutions Platform et al., 2020). Since the beginning of the first lockdown and due to the economic crisis, most Syrians working as day labourers in construction, agricultural or in the janitorial sector, lost their job because such work has been put on hold as a result of the pandemic. This has affected their ability to shop for food and basic goods. Of the 121 respondents to the CAMALEON phone survey (March 2020), 78% of this group said there were fewer opportunities to find new daily labour and 22% had their daily labour jobs discontinued (CAMALEON, 2020). To overcome the economic hardship resulting from the lockdown and the Lebanese economic crisis, Syrian respondents will have to increase their debt and debt-bonded labour (94%), reduce the quantity and quality of meals (65%) and move to a more affordable house or shelter (17%) (SEED et al. 2020).

5.2 Social Distancing

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control defines social distancing as “an action taken to minimise contact with other individuals; social distancing measures comprise one category of non-pharmaceutical countermeasures (NPCs)¹ aimed at reducing disease transmission and thereby also reducing pressure on health services” (ECDC, 2020). It assumes that residents have adequate space, services, and social safety nets to survive such an order. Based on LPC report, Syrians reacted to the social distancing orders by trying to avoid close contact with strangers, and minimizing gatherings and crowds (54%). Moreover, they decreased the number of movements outside and between the ITs, constraining children inside the tents. Respondents in areas as Aarsal and Ghazze mentioned that they might consider blocking access to their communities for non-residents if the situation worsens (Lebanon Protection Consortium, 2020).

5.3 Health measures

To reduce the risk of exposure to COVID—19, cleaning and disinfection, like frequent hand washing, are the most valuable measures to be implemented. Normal and routine cleaning with soap and water will decrease how much of the virus is on surfaces and objects, which reduces the risk of exposure (CDC, 2020). However, the majority of Syrians

¹ Since the adoption of the *Policy Paper on Syrian Displacement* in 2014, the Lebanese legal framework deliberately criminalizes the presence and labor of Syrians in Lebanon by making it close to impossible for refugees to work and live in the country legally. As a result, three quarters of UN-registered Syrian refugees currently residing in Lebanon are in illegal status, and the ratio increases considerably if one includes the thousands of unregistered refugees who came in the country after registration was prohibited in January 2015 (Fawaz et al., 2018). Furthermore, the sponsoring system introduced in 2014 by the Lebanese General Security created an additional unhelpful power dynamic between the refugee and host communities forcing foreign nationals, including displaced Syrians, to have an employer who acts as a sponsor (kafil). This system gave power to individual Lebanese over Syrian refugees, who in some cases were exploited (Sukkar et al., 2020).

in Lebanon are facing challenges to follow risk reduction practices. 50% of the Syrians interviewed by SEED in Tripoli practice regular handwashing while only 39% of the interviewees of the LPC survey stressed personal hygiene and handwashing with 26% focused more on the sanitation and sterilization of the spaces. The results of the poll show that Syrians' main concerns and priorities are on hygiene items (detergents, bleach..) and protective elements such as masks and plastic gloves. However, they require financial assistance and water availability, mainly in the areas where water trucking is the only water resource (LPC, 2020). Indeed, water resources in Lebanon are scarce in terms of both quality and quantity. Under the pressure of the Syrians influx in an overstretched situation, communities have thus become more dependent on alternative sources such as water delivery by truck, which in turn has created an unregulated parallel water supply market, further weakening the formal water providers (OXFAM, 2017).

5 Conclusion

This preliminary research has shown that the pandemic is not democratic. It has and will hit vulnerable and marginalized communities the hardest and will likely end up reinforcing existing hierarchies. Forcibly displaced, migrants, refugees and people on the move are at heightened risk. Human rights organizations released a press statement calling for the right of worldwide refugees to be protected in the COVID—19 response. The disease could be controlled only if there is an inclusive approach. Therefore, recognizing and addressing the stark reality of the socio-spatial inequality of deprived communities, refugees and the displaced is essential for addressing the current pandemic.

To conclude it is worth mentioning that when Syrians were asked if the Coronavirus has influenced their decision to remain in Lebanon, no household reported an intention to leave Lebanon or move from the area they are currently living. They are aware that the virus is everywhere, and they are currently unable to move (NRC, 2020). However, 10% of the Syrians interviewed by LPC expressed willingness to return to Syria or to move to a neighbouring country (Lebanon Protection Consortium, 2020).

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