A MATTER OF CASH AND RESILIENCE

Lessons from a review of Oxfam’s incentive-based volunteering programmes in Za’atari camp

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With limited job opportunities available to Syrian refugees living in Za’atari camp in Jordan, incentive-based volunteering (IBV) programmes remain one of the main sources of income for thousands of camp residents. A previous Effectiveness Review conducted by Oxfam on household income in Za’atari camp found that those engaged in IBV activities reported a 28% increase in their wealth between 2014 and 2018, as opposed to a 4% decline for those who were not engaged. Although IBV programmes are not a substitute for sustainable job opportunities, they play a vital role in injecting cash into the camp’s economy and improving the living conditions of Syrian refugees, and even more so during the lockdown due to COVID-19.
1 INTRODUCTION

Za’atari refugee camp, located in the north of Jordan in Mafraq, about 20km away from the Syrian border, opened in 2012 to accommodate the influx of refugees from Syria to Jordan. The camp hosts around 80,000 refugees, of which 30,509 are working-age residents, for which few work opportunities are available. Policy changes have been made over the past several years to improve refugees’ access to work opportunities. In July 2017, the Za’atari Office for Employment (ZOE) was opened to facilitate work permits being issued to camp residents. While refugees in Za’atari camp were eligible for permits prior to this, access to work opportunities outside the camp increased significantly after ZOE’s establishment. Later, in November 2018, the operation of home-based businesses was legalized in Za’atari camp, and some such businesses are now being supported by INGO programmes. However, despite efforts to support refugee camp residents with their businesses and facilitate their inclusion in local job markets, many of the income opportunities in the camp come from the support of incentive-based volunteering (IBV) programmes run by the humanitarian community.

There are currently about 4,000 active IBV opportunities in Za’atari camp on a monthly basis, down from 7,000 opportunities in December 2017. As of April 2020, the number of opportunities that were available were only able to provide for just over 25% of Za’atari camp’s 15,606 households. Of the available opportunities in the same period, 40% were semi-skilled, 26% skilled, 24% highly-skilled, and 10% technical. These opportunities were mostly in the education (28%) and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (27%) sectors. A total of JOD 659,454 ($930,393) was distributed to IBV volunteers in April 2020 by agencies operating in the camp.

As of April 2020, Oxfam ran the second-largest IBV programme in the camp, managing around 700 opportunities on a monthly basis. About 60% of these are semi-skilled positions, including street sweepers and trolley workers who collect litter across Za’atari camp that is then sorted in Oxfam’s recycling facilities. Over the next three years, Oxfam will be facing annual reductions in the number of IBV positions it can offer due to changes in donor funding priorities that favour more long-term interventions. Compared with the number of IBV positions offered in 2019, this is expected to amount to a 27% reduction, placing refugees in the camp at risk of reduced access to important short-term sources of income.
Box 1: Oxfam in Jordan operates a number of IBV programmes in Za’atari camp across all twelve districts

Oxfam operates the Bags for Life/Lel-Haya programme in the camp. This initiative has created a women-friendly workspace through hiring Syrian refugee women as seamstresses to transform old UNHCR tents into fashionable tote bags. Oxfam also runs a greenhouse agriculture programme that trains women in greenhouse growing and harvesting. These are both incentive-based training programmes that employ a few IBV volunteers as trainers.

Under the WASH programme, Oxfam in Jordan operates a large-scale solid waste management project with positions that range from recycling facility operators to litter collectors. This initiative provides a large number of IBV opportunities, especially for litter pickers, who are rotated every 29 days. In 2019, Oxfam provided a total of 15,000 IBV opportunities for 6,200 camp residents. These opportunities alone cover just over one-fifth of the working-age population in the camp on an annual basis.

In 2018, Oxfam conducted an Effectiveness Review of IBV programmes in Jordan’s Za’atari camp. The study researched the impacts of IBV programmes on refugee families and households. While the majority of these programmes are short in duration and do not provide formal jobs, they remain essential to the livelihoods of camp residents due to there being limited authorized work opportunities available to refugees. Despite improvements to legal work opportunities in the form of more work permits being issued to camp residents, a significant number of structural barriers exist that prevent refugees accessing the local job market, especially for refugee women. These include cultural barriers and gender norms, lack of familiarity with the processes, fear of harassment and exploitation, and perceived lack of safety outside the camp, as well as limited job opportunities overall. Because of this and the centralized control of Syrian refugee mobility in Za’atari camp, IBV programming is crucial in providing opportunities for camp residents, especially women, to earn incomes in the camp with dignity. While this briefing and the Effectiveness Review are focused on Za’atari camp, their results and takeaways can be applied to similar camp settings and host communities with a high density of Syrian refugees.

Because the Za’atari refugee camp economy operates somewhat in parallel to local markets rather than being integrated, there is limited space in the camp for activities that fuel spending and cash circulation and hence stimulate economic growth. Thus, several aid agencies supporting refugees in Za’atari operate cash distributions and IBV programmes to act as cash injections to households within the camp. This, in turn, enables refugees to purchase groceries and other household goods from markets within the camp and, for those with leave permits or work permits, from markets surrounding the camp.

While acknowledging concerns regarding IBV interventions and theirunsustainability, they continue to be an important source of income to those restricted by social and policy barriers that prevent their integration into job opportunities at farms or factories in nearby host communities.
Furthermore, they have had significant non-income benefits that promote refugee wellness and economic stability. With the COVID-19 pandemic affecting Jordan, IBV programmes have been even more important to refugees living in Za'atari, as income-generating opportunities in the camp decreased significantly as a result of the lockdown, while movement restrictions prevented access to opportunities outside the camp.

2 CAMP ECONOMY

Refugees have limited access to job opportunities, making IBV programmes an important creator of jobs.

Of the 15 identified sources of employment in the camp, income from IBV was reported as the third highest income generator among a sample of 1,136 individuals. The income gained from IBV is similar to other jobs available in and around Za'atari camp, and IBV opportunities cover nearly 14% of working-age camp residents on a monthly basis. This is within the context of high rates of unemployment, limited job availability and poverty among both camp residents and those living in surrounding communities – in Mafraq host communities, unemployment among Jordanians stands at 18.9%; among Syrians, this doubles to 39.5%. Since transitioning to more sustainable jobs is not yet properly supported for most Syrian refugees in Za'atari camp, it remains that IBV opportunities play an important role in reducing the number of issues stemming from financial insecurity, as work opportunities around the camp are limited and often inaccessible.

Households engaged in IBV programmes are more likely to have higher incomes over time.

Overall, in the 12 months preceding the 2018 survey, households engaged in IBV reported incomes that were 23% higher, on average, than households not engaged in IBV. Furthermore, households engaged in IBV opportunities were 19% less likely to engage in other means of income generation. These results both suggest that engagement in IBV activities decreases the need for a household to pursue multiple sources of income, as households can rely on the income from IBV work more than many other means of income generation available to camp residents. While IBV opportunities are short term in nature and are one of several sources of income in the camp, they remain a reliable and stable economic activity. The commitment to ensure constant availability of opportunities ensures that refugees have access to work.

IBV programmes are a supplement to the seasonal work opportunities available around the camp.

The main two income opportunities available outside the camp to its residents are factory work in nearby economic zones and work on nearby
farms. Since the former largely relies on a rigorous work schedule with early transport times and late working days, many have turned to nearby farms due to the flexibility of the work available to them there. However, the farm opportunities available are seasonal, with the number of positions decreasing in the autumn and winter months. When Oxfam held a focus group with litter-picking workers, 100% of the males interviewed mentioned that they preferred litter picking in the winter months due to the availability of agricultural work opportunities in the summer months. Women interviewees, however, reported preferring working in the camp regardless of the season due to concerns about safety, exploitation and the need to be closer to home for care duties.

3 TARGETING AND DESIGN

Oxfam operates two programmes in the camp that specifically target women through IBV and incentive-based training. These programmes are an opportunity to promote the economic participation of women refugees.

Of those engaged in IBV programmes, 38% are women. This is more than eight times the proportion of work permits in Jordan that are issued to women, which has stood at 4.7% since the beginning of the Syrian work permit fee waiver grace periods in February 2016. This is also higher than the overall female to male ratio of labour force participation in Jordan, which stood at 22% female versus 78% male in 2018. Prior to the conflict in Syria, in 2010, women to men labour force participation ratios in Syria stood at 18% female to 82% male. This highlights the significant difference between economic opportunities accessible to women in Za'atari camp and in the economy at large, starkly contrasting with the gender inequality in economic participation rates in both the Jordanian and Syrian economies. Furthermore, the Oxfam Effectiveness Review found that 21% of households that were engaged in IBV had at least one woman engaged in an economic activity, as opposed to 10% of households not engaged in IBV activities. Because Oxfam and other agencies in the camp can tailor employment programmes to suit the needs of women refugees, women taking up IBV opportunities are more likely to challenge societal norms and participate in economic activities to earn an income for their households.

IBV programmes are an opportunity to target the most vulnerable in the camp.

The diverse IBV opportunities available in the camp allow less formally educated refugees to access income opportunities. However, it remains the case that highly educated refugee men are more likely to occupy IBV positions than women or less educated refugees in general. Indeed, skilled, highly skilled and technical positions are all recruited based on
merit, such as years of relevant experience or formal qualifications, rather than on a rotation basis. This decreases the likelihood of inclusion of more vulnerable individuals. However, with the availability of around 1,700 semi-skilled rotation-based opportunities in the camp on a monthly basis, Oxfam and other agencies are able to target more vulnerable refugees that have fewer opportunities to work in highly skilled or technical positions.

Since December 2019, Oxfam has provided ‘reasonable accommodations’ for people with disabilities to increase their access to IBV opportunities. The percentage of people with disabilities in Za’atari camp is 30.5%, with 68.3% of households including at least one person with disabilities. Considering that the job market is largely inaccessible to people with disabilities, it is crucial to provide tailored opportunities that support those with disabilities in generating income.

**IBV opportunities mostly rely on frequent rotation, ensuring income reaches as many households as possible.**

Rotating volunteers through labour-intensive positions creates jobs, but there can be a trade-off in terms of efficiency. For instance, while the transportation of recyclable materials could be more efficient using trucks, Oxfam instead chooses to rely on trolleys operated by volunteers in order to create more income opportunities. IBV programmes provide a chance to design income-generating opportunities in a way that distributes income among more camp residents. Relying on short-term work with frequent rotation periods allows this, enabling people to access opportunities on a turn-by-turn basis. While longer rotation periods are more stable, they provide incomes for fewer people. Oxfam relies on more frequent rotation to reach as many camp residents as possible, especially those that are more vulnerable.

## 4 ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

**Oxfam seeks to provide opportunities that have meaningful outcomes for camp residents. We look to support refugees in contributing to the provision of a public good.**

Oxfam runs a litter-picking and recycling operation in Za’atari camp, which requires a mix of semi-skilled, skilled and highly skilled workers. Prior to the programme starting, bins were overflowing and rubbish was everywhere. However, this operation has helped reduce rubbish in the streets of the camp and diverted recyclable materials away from landfill. This also led to changes in behaviour among camp residents, with many now voluntarily separating their waste at the source in support of IBV trolley workers from their community. This large-scale, labour intensive project continues to provide a number of work opportunities, all of which
contribute to an important service for the maintenance of the camp.

**Camp economic stability is fragile and is partially reliant on the availability of IBV opportunities.**

Despite the availability of other means of income generation for residents in Za’atari camp, it remains crucial to continue providing IBV opportunities as well. Due to the aforementioned role that cash injections play in sustaining economic activity, IBV opportunities have and continue to be an essential part of the camp economy. As refugee mobility and movement continues to be centralized and controlled, these injections remain crucial to stability of the camp. A previous Oxfam study on household income, for example, found that those engaged in IBV reported a 28% increase in their wealth between 2014 and 2018, as opposed to a 4% decline for those that were not engaged. Despite issues with IBV opportunities being short term, they have a significant impact on improving overall outcomes for financial stability in the camp.

**The COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted the economic resilience of the camp population.**

With strict country-wide lockdown measures imposed by the Government of Jordan in order to limit the spread of the virus, the population of the camp has had to remain confined within the camp premises since mid-March 2020 and until the camp partially re-opens on 28 July 2020. As a result, those who normally seek formal or informal employment opportunities outside the camp had not been able to do so for more than three months at the time of publication. A survey on the impact of COVID-19 in Za’atari camp conducted by Oxfam in May 2020 revealed that 77% of interviewed refugees saw access to cash as the main source of concern, while 90% only had enough cash to meet their needs for up to two weeks.

Between mid-March and May 2020, IBV programmes inside the camp were either entirely or partially put on hold, and rotations and recruitment of volunteers postponed due to movement restrictions and limitations on Oxfam staff accessing Za’atari camp during this period. Even operating with a reduced number of volunteers, IBV programmes remained vital during lockdown, as refugees had access to even fewer income-generating opportunities. Oxfam’s IBV activities for solid waste management were allowed to keep operating as an essential service. All volunteers on rotation were able to receive salaries for the duration of their contracts even if they were not able to work. However, refugees waiting for their rotation were not able to receive cash. The reduction in work opportunities for refugees in Za’atari camp was demonstrated by the number of people who applied for Oxfam’s paid volunteer positions in the first week of June, when Oxfam advertised 100 trolley worker opportunities. This round of recruitment received 750 applications, while a similar recruitment prior to lockdown would normally receive about 250 applications.

Opportunities for women were especially impacted by lockdown restrictions. Incentive-based training opportunities were considered non-
essential in this period and had to be temporarily shut down. These opportunities include training in Oxfam greenhouses and sewing projects, both of which exclusively train women and are an important source of income for women in the camp. Moreover, restrictions on entering and exiting Za’atari camp also prevented women from accessing opportunities at nearby farms, highlighting the disproportionate impact that lockdown had on women’s livelihood opportunities.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the Syria crisis having entered its ninth year, continuous support from the aid community remains vital to millions of Syrian refugees across the region. With little hope of returning safely and slow-going discussions about other long-term solutions, Syrian refugees such as those living in Za’atari camp are likely to remain displaced. While doing so, they will increasingly need sustainable and resilient mechanisms to meet their basic needs, beyond existing aid programmes. In the current context, IBV programmes are not a substitute for sustainable job opportunities for camp residents. However, they remain an important facilitator of camp economic stability and a mitigator of the issues brought about by there being limited work opportunities in and around Za’atari camp. This is important for those whose opportunities to generate income other than IBV continue to be limited and inaccessible, especially for marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women and people with disabilities. To continue to support the wellbeing of Syrian refugees in Za’atari camp, donors, in coordination with the broader aid community, should do the following:

Continue supporting IBV opportunities in Za’atari camp and similar settings.

Settings like Za’atari camp that host a large refugee community while enforcing restrictions on open market linkages and limitations on free entry and exit, need these opportunities in the short and medium term, as surrounding community work opportunities remain limited in scope and number. Since opportunities are scarce and not accessible for all camp residents, IBV opportunities are a crucial intervention to ensure short-term financial stability. Based on the experience of lockdown, and considering that such exceptional measures could be used again in the future, donors should show flexibility in their funding allocations to IBV interventions. This will ensure that these programmes can be turned into multipurpose cash assistance initiatives to respond to the loss of work opportunities as a result of crippling emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
Support the broader inclusion of people with disabilities in IBV opportunities.

The prevalence of disabilities, especially in settings like Za’atari camp, make it all the more important to use these interventions to support those with disabilities in accessing income opportunities. IBV interventions should uphold the rights of people with disabilities as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, through providing reasonable accommodation, ensuring accessibility and following the principles of universal design. Denying these rights further excludes people with disabilities from their right to work and employment, which causes a series of other rights to be inaccessible too.

Support the inclusion and empowerment of women through IBV work and training programmes.

Oxfam and other agencies working in Za’atari camp have successfully included women, to varying degrees, in IBV programmes. Their participation has been across all roles and in both women-only and mixed workspaces. Women’s uptake of these IBV opportunities in camp and host communities has shown that men are becoming less reluctant to work alongside women or let women look for jobs on their own. Considering low rates of women’s economic participation in Syria, levels of women’s participation in Za’atari camp are significant. IBV programmes should address the socioeconomic barriers that prevent more Syrian women from seeking formal employment, as well as mainstream behavioural change activities that target cultural restrictions on women’s economic participation.

Monitor the impact of IBV rotations on residents’ livelihoods.

The trade-off between short-term rotations and a higher income for each worker needs to be assessed against broader outcomes for the financial wellness of camp residents, as well as camp market activity. While the litter-picking IBV rotation was initially set to two weeks, at the request of the community, this was increased to 29 days. While volunteers earn a larger sum at the end of the work period, fewer households have access to the IBV opportunity over the course of the year. The degree to which some opportunities should be rotated, and the distribution of opportunities across the camp, needs to be monitored and assessed in line with achieving economic stability for residents.

Support IBV to attain long-run and sustainable financial self-reliance in Za’atari camp.

In order to enable residents to set up home-based businesses and make other moves towards sustainability and self-reliance in Za’atari camp, there is a need to facilitate cash flow in the short term. Support for small
businesses in the form of coaching and grants is useful, however, the continuity of the business is dependent on continuous income and the purchasing power of residents. Cash injections through IBV opportunities provide important support to these activities. They need to continue until businesses in Za'atari are sustainable in the long run, all the while ensuring commitment to developing more durable approaches to refugee self-reliance.
1 Over the age of 18 years.

2 The Za'atari Office for Employment is jointly run by the International Labour Organization, the UNHCR and the Government of Jordan.

3 Since the start of the work permit programme, 27,051 permits have been issued to refugees in Za'atari camp, including renewals. See Ministry of Labour Syrian Refugee Unit. (2020). Work Permit Progress Report January 2020. https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/syrian-refugee-unit-work-permit-progress-report-january-2020

4 Incentive-based volunteering is a term used by humanitarian agencies operating in Jordan’s refugee camps to refer to what may otherwise be known as cash for work (CfW). CfW is an initiative in which refugees are remunerated for supporting partner programming in the camp. As per the Cash Learning Partnership definition: ‘Cash payments provided on the condition of undertaking designated work. This is generally paid according to time worked (e.g. number of days, daily rate), but may also be quantified in terms of outputs (e.g. number of items produced, cubic metres dug). CfW interventions are usually in public or community work programmes but can also include home-based and other forms of work.’ CaLP. (2018). Glossary of Cash Transfer Programming. Technical Advisor Committee. Cash Learning Partnership. http://www.cashlearning.org/resources/glossary

5 The skill level of an IBV opportunity impacts the hourly wage, as well as the selection process and the rotation period. Semi-skilled opportunities are offered on a rotation basis, with a rotation period of between 29 days and three months. Candidates for skilled positions and up go through a recruitment process. These positions have a rotation period that ranges from one year to three years.

6 Other sectors include child protection (16%), community mobilization (8%), shelter (6%), food (7%), basic needs and livelihoods (4%), and health (4%). See UNHCR. (2019). Incentive-Based Volunteering in Za’atari Camp Factsheet, December 2019.

7 The Jordanian dinar is pegged to the US dollar at the fixed rate of 1 JOD = 1.41 USD.


13 Under current CfW standard operating procedures, only one member of a household can engage in CfW opportunities at any given time. Because of this, women’s engagement is significant considering that they would likely be primary breadwinners in their households, challenging societal norms and gendered household dynamics.
14 The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD) defines ‘Reasonable accommodation’ as ‘necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms’. In practice, for example, this can include adjustments to work and break times, access to information in braille, or provision of a sign language interpreter when needed. See note 17 for citation.

15 According to Humanity & Inclusion, (2018), disability is defined as ‘the level of difficulties a person is facing when performing basic activities that could put him/her at risk of not participating in society’. See Humanity & Inclusion and iMMAP. (2018). Removing Barriers: The Path towards Inclusive Access Disability Assessment among Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, Amman: Humanity & Inclusion and iMMAP. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/67818.pdf


17 The Syria Refugee Affairs Department (SRAD) announced that, as of 28 July 2020, the camp authorities will allow work permit holders to leave the camp. Special leave permit holders are also permitted to leave the camp; however, these permits are to be issued on a case-by-case basis.

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