

 Lebanon

# From local to global advocacy in Lebanon

By Nour Shawaf, Oxfam Protection Research and Policy Advisor in Lebanon (2016–19)

*Under its commitment to adopt a community-based approach in its humanitarian programmes, Oxfam in Lebanon started supporting the establishment of 'peer groups' (community committees) in urban areas and informal tented settlements for refugees from Syria in 2013. This case study highlights only one aspect of this work: a 2017 participatory protection research project undertaken by Oxfam in Lebanon; local protection partner Utopia; and community committees of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as well as their Lebanese hosting communities. Its purpose is to illustrate how community-based protection can provide platforms for people to raise their voices on protection issues at the local, national and international levels without hindering their sense of agency, while maintaining their control over priorities and solutions.*

Over a million refugees have fled to Lebanon. Providing those affected by displacement with the space to talk, be listened to, make decisions and influence those with power can create change. Programming in humanitarian settings where there are great needs but scarce resources is difficult, but can and should accommodate people's choices, priorities and solutions. Adopting a community-based approach in all aspects of programming raises the voices of those who should be heard and upholds their right to influence their present and future.

The team wanted to research the route refugees had taken to reach Lebanon in 2016–17. An upcoming donors' conference on Syria and the region<sup>1</sup> was identified as an opportunity to showcase the dangers refugees had to endure. However, as the teams started consulting community members and committees, there was a sense of unease with the topic. Simply put, it was not what they wanted to talk about. A women's group approached the research team with a different suggestion: talking about solutions rather than their past and hardships.

The design of the research was shifted to a participatory model, in which the affected people designed their own research that would reflect their own priorities. At that moment, the community committees became the research team. Refugees and host community members started designing the tools to be used with the support of Oxfam and Utopia. The volunteers were trained on responsible data management and ethical data collection to ensure any risks were identified and mitigated or responded to. The topic stirred the interest of communities who became involved in the process, its outcome and even the advocacy at a later stage. They wanted to know more and to understand where their voices had reached. It was challenging, with long hours of consultation and disagreement. One day, a meeting lasted six hours to reach agreement on the wording of the recommendations of the research report. But the community committees, Oxfam staff and partners were committed to ensuring the lives of those most affected were reflected in the words published.

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<sup>1</sup> Later known as the first Brussels Conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region". See Council of the European Union, "Council adopts EU strategy on Syria", 03 April 2017, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/03/fac-conclusions-syria/> (accessed in January 2021).

It was impossible to stop at the report. The committee members wanted people and decision makers to see the world through their lens. They came up with the idea of a photography project called 'Behind the lens of displacement'.<sup>2</sup> Volunteers received photography lessons from professionals, and then showed us the world from their perspective. This was their reality; they chose what they wanted to show us and what they wanted decision makers to see. Our role was just providing the platform and taking them to the national level through an advocacy event that included an exhibition of the photos taken by community members and their stories. While not all of the people who participated in the research project were able to attend the exhibition, those who did spoke of displacement, a bitter present, and a hopeless future.

While the voices of refugees are sometimes 'heard' in international settings, it is often only those we are able to reach, who may not be representative of the most marginalised. With all the impediments to taking all those who have worked and participated in this project on a lobbying tour, we asked them to decide what would be their key messages to policy makers. They drafted our talking points. They confirmed their findings and told us what to focus on. We took their voices from the local to the national and then the global level through the first Brussels Conference. Most of our messages began with 'as a woman in North Bekaa said' and 'as a man in Tripoli confirmed'. We recognize our position as researchers, and what we say will never do them justice; however, together we took community-based protection to the next level. The community committee members and volunteers who participated talked to policy makers and received their feedback, hoping that one day their promises of safety would be fulfilled.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://frame.life/Photos/19/-2/Behind-the-Lens-of-Displacement>