IOB Evaluation

Executive summary

Between Prospects and Precarity

An evaluation of Dutch assistance to refugee reception in the Syria region (2016-2021)

March 2024

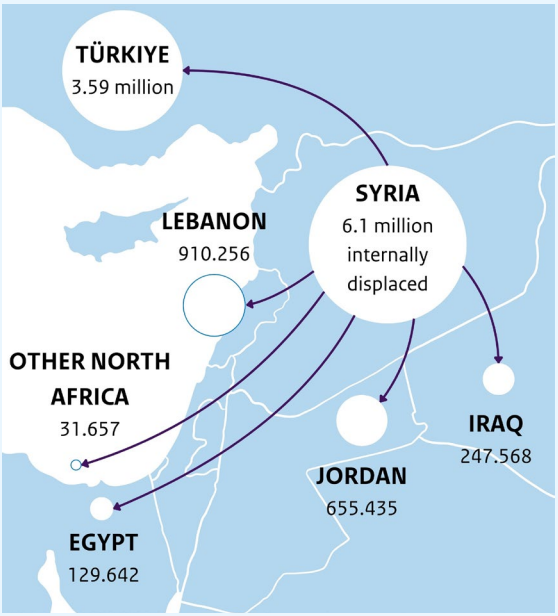
Executive summary

As a result of the civil war in Syria, around 7 million people have fled the country. Around 80% of them are hosted by Syria's neighbouring countries (see map).[1] Approximately 1.4 million Syrians have found asylum in Europe.

The presence of such large numbers of refugees has put severe pressure on infrastructure, public service delivery and social relations in the host countries, with potentially negative consequences for regional stability.

Three developments formed the background against which the Dutch policy on refugee reception in the region was developed:

1. the increasing numbers of refugees and irregular migrants arriving in Europe (in particular the 2015 European asylum crisis),
2. international consensus on the need for new approaches to dealing with protracted situations of displacement, and
3. the development of new European migration policies.



Source: UNHCR/Reliefweb, AFP. The data regarding Syria is from December 2019. Other data is from March, 2020.

In addition to the rapidly growing number of refugees, it was taking longer and longer for refugees to return home, and they were increasingly staying in cities and villages rather than in refugee camps. For these reasons, the Netherlands and international partners adopted a development-oriented approach to complement traditional humanitarian types of assistance. Support was aimed at the (temporary) integration of refugees into the societies and economies of host countries to allow them to become self-reliant. In addition, host countries were supported economically to be able to host refugees and even benefit economically from their presence. In addition, support specifically targeted the more vulnerable members of host communities – who might be negatively affected by the presence of large numbers of refugees – so that they were not disadvantaged compared to the refugees being supported.

In addition to the objective of improving the prospects of refugees and their host communities, a political motive underlying the financial support for refugee reception in the region was to prevent the onward migration of refugees to third countries, including Europe and the Netherlands. The argument that support for protection, education and employment in host countries could prevent the onward migration of refugees was substantiated by a reference to a UNHCR report from 2015. However, this objective has not been operationalised or monitored. Between the end of 2017 and 2021, this argument was no longer mentioned in policy documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[1] Notwithstanding the number of refugees officially registered by UNHCR, the estimated number of Syrians in Lebanon is around 1.5 million and in Jordan around 1.3 million. As such, these countries host the largest (Lebanon) and second largest (Jordan) number of refugees per capita in the world.

The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) evaluated Dutch support for the reception of refugees in the region in Lebanon and Jordan in the period 2016-2021. In this period, the Netherlands spent EUR 475 million on Development Approaches to Forced Displacement (DAFD) in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. This includes EUR 170 million that was spent through the Prospects partnership, which started in 2019.[2] The Dutch contribution to the reception of refugees in Türkiye was provided through the EU-led Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT), which was evaluated by the EU. Lessons learned from this evaluation have been included in the IOB report.

Evaluation questions

The key question of the evaluation was:

> *'What has been the Dutch contribution to improving the prospects of refugees from Syria and their host communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and how can this contribution be improved?'*[3]

The main question thus related to the *effectiveness* of the policy. The intended objective had two dimensions: a) improving the prospects of refugees from Syria and their host communities, and b) preventing onward migration to third countries, including the Netherlands and other countries in the EU.

Explanatory sub-questions also focused on the relevance and coherence of the policy, including attention to the specific needs of women and girls:

1. What was the relevance of the development-oriented approach (also known as *DAFD*)? Were the Dutch-supported interventions aligned with the needs of refugees and host communities? Was Dutch support relevant in preventing refugees' onward migration to third countries? What is known about the social cohesion and participation of refugees in local communities and about the economic participation and economic impact of refugees on local communities?
2. To what extent has a gender perspective been meaningfully integrated into the Dutch-supported interventions? Has sufficient attention been paid to the specific needs of women and girls?
3. How coherent was the policy? To what extent did the policy objectives and approach match the priorities of the host countries, international frameworks, other donors' interventions and the broader Dutch support to these countries?
4. What did the different funding modalities (types of support programmes) mean for the quality of programme management, in particular the selection of partners, the cooperation between the policy department in The Hague and the embassies, and the cooperation between humanitarian and development partners?

[2] Interventions supported under this partnership were not included in this evaluation, as the partnership is being evaluated separately. With some exceptions, the projects analysed in this evaluation started prior to the introduction of the Prospects partnership in 2019.

[3] Within this study, the policy reconstruction, literature review and online conversations with refugees and host communities focused on Iraq as well. The context analysis, assessment of projects and country visits were limited to Lebanon and Jordan.

Main conclusion

Although Dutch support to hosting refugees in the region has achieved positive short-term results for refugees and host communities, it has not effectively contributed to improving the prospects of refugees from Syria or their host communities in Lebanon and Jordan. The overarching policy objectives of increased self-reliance and improved socio-economic prospects for refugees and host communities have not been achieved, and have become more elusive. For many, prospects have deteriorated, particularly in Lebanon. This was partly due to negative contextual trends beyond the influence of the Netherlands, such as political crises and economic decline, aggravated by Covid-19. And partly because a critical assumption underlying the policy – i.e. that host countries would be willing to adopt an inclusive approach towards refugees – did not hold in Lebanon and only partially in Jordan. In both countries, refugees had little access to decent work in the formal economy.

The economic participation and impact of refugees in local communities was mainly limited to the informal sector, which accounted for about half of the economy in both countries. When refugees did work, it was mainly temporary and low-paid work, often under poor conditions. At the same time, their presence put pressure on infrastructure and services in an already worrying socio-economic situation.

This combination of factors limited the effectiveness of the Dutch-supported activities, most of which were local in scope. Nevertheless, short-term results have been achieved. Examples include the access of refugee children to education and improved conditions in schools, the protection of women and girls from domestic violence, and the ability to provide daily livelihoods through financial transfers to families.

Despite the fact that the Netherlands supported both refugees and host communities, the public perception remained that foreign aid benefited refugees more than the local population. Combined with segregated education and increasing competition for low-paid work in a stagnating economy, discrimination and tensions among and between refugees and the local population increased.

The political rationale for supporting the reception of refugees in the region was partly based on the idea that this would help to reduce the onward migration of refugees to Europe, including the Netherlands. However, the evidence for a causal relationship between development assistance and refugees' onward migration is weak. Based on a literature review, IOB concludes that Dutch DAFD programming focused on themes (protection, education and employment) that may play a role in influencing refugees' aspirations and capabilities for onward migration. However, refugees' decisions on whether or not to move on are highly complex and depend on many factors.[4] In practice, safety and legal protection, access to education, and secure and dignified employment for refugees remained major challenges in both Jordan and Lebanon. Hence, the lack of financial resources and networks made onward migration impossible for most refugees.

[4] To illustrate the complexity of this relationship, migration research shows that the initial stages of development can even induce migration.

Specific conclusions

The lack of effectiveness can be partly explained by the limited relevance and coherence of the policy. Although the supported projects thematically matched the needs of refugees and host communities, their relevance was often limited by setting unrealistic goals or ignoring factors that were crucial for achieving (sustainable) results, such as differences in religious, cultural and social norms, lack of government capacity and gender-related constraints.

The Dutch programmes were flexible in the sense that they allowed ongoing projects and the programming of new ones to adapt to important contextual changes, such as the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic or the increasing need in Lebanon to shift from development-oriented interventions to meeting basic needs.

Policy coherence was limited in various ways. First, assistance was more donor-driven than demand-driven. As the interests and perspectives of host countries differed from those of international donors, they had different funding priorities. Second, local donor coordination, i.e. preventing overlap, limiting funding gaps, and promoting synergies, was complicated by the fact that critical funding decisions are generally taken in donors' capitals. As a result, coordination focused more on sharing information and establishing joint positions on local developments. Third, promoting a coherent package of Dutch support was limited by the large number of Dutch instruments in both countries, most of which were decided upon in The Hague. Nevertheless, the embassies have made good efforts to connect these instruments and found some niches, such as in agriculture, water and private sector development.

At two points in time (in 2016 and 2018), spending pressure put the quality of funded activities under strain, as large DAFD funds were made available before results frameworks, sound management arrangements and sufficient staff capacity were in place. The shift from a portfolio of individual projects towards a partnership with large international agencies has facilitated contract management. However, managing and further developing such a large and complex partnership required more staff than was anticipated. The subsequent allocation of additional staff to embassies and the policy department brought staffing levels in line with the needs of the task.

The embassies played an important role in programme management in the different aid modalities (including the project portfolio and Prospects partnership), although the policy department remained formally responsible as the budget holder. At times, this 'hybrid' division of roles led to confusion among the embassies and project partners, particularly when the embassies and the ministry were not fully aligned. Cooperation between the ministry and the embassies has improved in recent years because investments were made in the working relationship. Working structurally with the Prospects partners – key players in international refugee policy – has contributed to the knowledge and a learning culture in the policy department and embassies.

Overall, mainstreaming gender in Dutch projects was unsuccessful. With some exceptions (mainly projects on gender-based violence), this remained limited to adding women as a target group, rather than addressing specific gender needs.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation, IOB makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Reassess the objectives and strategy at the regional and/or country level.

- Make key policy assumptions explicit and regularly examine their validity in specific contexts, preferably with partners and local stakeholders.
- Be realistic about what the policy can achieve in terms of promoting self-reliance and consider adjusting the highest-level objectives. In volatile contexts, such as Lebanon, it may be necessary to 'shift back' to more humanitarian types of assistance. Scenario thinking could allow for timely shifts between types of interventions and instruments.
- Clarify how gender mainstreaming and gender equality should be prioritised and operationalised in DAFD programming to prevent it from becoming an afterthought in activities, and to ensure that when it is addressed, it is done in a meaningful way and in line with the development of a 'feminist foreign policy'.
- Avoid creating and giving in to spending pressures. Newly released development funds should not be spent until a sound policy approach and results framework have been developed.

Recommendation 2: Maintain dialogue and an open attitude towards host governments and alternative pathways, even when interests and perspectives are far apart.

- Although promoting policy space for the inclusion of refugees is difficult, keep exploring ways to promote more inclusive approaches, the most promising of which is direct funding of inclusive policy measures, either at the national or local level.
- Consider possible innovative pathways to increase self-reliance. For instance, skills development (language, ICT) could benefit refugees and create a pathway for them to find legal routes to third countries.
- Consider strengthening the Dutch approach to responsibility sharing, for instance by increasing the resettlement quota and making this more visible to host governments. Engaging in a discussion on safe and dignified return, while adhering to its conditions and the principle of *non-refoulement*, rather than dismissing the idea of return 'for the time being', is a way of recognising the deep concerns of host governments and remaining in dialogue.
- Try to work with local governments (municipalities), taking care to avoid potential negative unintended effects.

Recommendation 3: Work as contextually and locally as possible.

- Ensure that policies, programmes and interventions are based on national (and even local) contexts and needs. Properly integrate centrally funded activities and results into a country-specific strategy, based on a sound analysis of local needs and the added value of the Netherlands.
- Develop mechanisms to involve local stakeholders and refugee representatives in all phases of programming, including during the needs assessment, project design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.
- Continue to focus on preventing tensions and promoting social cohesion and consult local organisations, including refugee organisations, to implement projects in a more context-sensitive way.
- Address the effort to make assistance more locally-led in a more structural way, for instance by embedding overarching and consistent contractual conditions in the framework agreements with Prospects partners. Try to mobilise like-minded donors to do the same and address the issue jointly in relevant meetings at UN Headquarters.

Recommendation 4: As the minister has decided to extend the Prospects partnership until 2027, continue to build the partnership, try to expand the donor base and connect it to other initiatives in the region.

- Clarify what the 'New Way of Working' implies and when it has been successfully implemented, recognising that it is a means to an end.
- Continue to try to broaden the donor base and develop governance arrangements that allow other donors to join without diluting the partnership's bold ambition.
- Allow flexibility for other organisations to join as partners when this adds value in a particular country context.

Recommendation 5: Ensure sufficient staff capacity for programme management, dialogue, political economy analysis, and monitoring and learning.

- Invest in longer-term specialised staff dedicated to working on DAFD and establish career paths within the organisation to support this effort. Managing the Prospects partnership and related programmes requires a specific mix of knowledge and competencies.
- Build on the learning culture that has been developed within the policy department and involve embassies and local partner offices to promote inter- and intra-regional learning. Learning requires constant attention and (therefore) staff capacity.

Sub-studies

IOB believes it is important to include the voices of both refugees and host communities in research. We therefore worked with a specialist team from Upinion to conduct online conversations with respondent panels in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. This exercise identified the greatest needs of refugees and host communities, economic and social participation, and the results of international support.

A team from University College London (UCL) has carried out a literature review of the factors relevant to refugee onward migration to third countries, social cohesion and economic participation in and impact on the economies of host countries.

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