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Ambrela

CASE STUDY

Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects of Slovak Organisations in Lebanon

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Examples of Humanitarian Aid Projects of Slovak Organisations in Lebanon

Lebanon is the country which hosts the highest number of refugees in the world in relation to its population[1] (every seventh inhabitant is a refugee). It is appropriate to ask: How is it that this small Middle Eastern country has not yet disintegrated? In the light of the events of spring 2020, concerns emerge: How will the living conditions of the domestic and refugee communities in Lebanon, already burdened by the economic crisis, be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic? And how are humanitarian and development organisations responding to it? In this document, we will present the Slovak intervention by members of Ambrela – Platform for Development Organisations.

Introduction: The tense situation in Lebanon

Currently, the small Middle Eastern country of Lebanon with its population of 6.8 million[2] is experiencing a political, financial and refugee crisis all at the same time. It is home to around one million refugees displaced by the war in nearby Syria, lasting since 2011.[3] UNHCR stopped registering the refugees five years ago, and the census has not taken place in the country for a long time now, so the exact numbers remain unknown. However, if we add up hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees displaced from society, who have been travelling to the country since 1948 until this day, the number may increase significantly. [4]

The European Union and its member states (including Slovakia) work to assist the Lebanese government in addressing the above-mentioned crises. One of the EU's strategies to deal with the refugee crisis and the growing number of people fleeing from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe is to help

1 UNHCR, 2020: Global Trends 2019
2 World Population Review, 2020: Lebanon Population 2020
3 TASR & Aktuality, 2020: Syria Is Facing the Worst Hunger Crisis Since the Beginning of the Civil War [In Slovak language]
4 TASR & SME, 2020: A Refugee from Syria Self-Immolated in Lebanon [In Slovak language]

the countries most affected by the crisis and closest to its epicentre. Lebanon may serve as an instance of what such aid looks like in practice. Since 2016, the Slovak Republic has been implementing humanitarian projects there through official development assistance under the brand of SlovakAid.

1. Alleviation of the refugee crisis under the brand of SlovakAid

This small country on the Mediterranean coast, where Shiites, Sunnis and Christians share power, still has the highest number of refugees per capita in the world. Still, Lebanon, tried by the 1975-1990 civil war and the wars with Israel (1982 and 2006), has not collapsed nor disintegrated. Still, the spring hunger strikes impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic may further deepen the internal disintegration and collapse of the state.

The problems associated with the refugee crisis are not manageable in the long run. The growing number of refugees from Syria is a heavy burden, especially for Lebanon's infrastructure and labour market. This is an issue especially in the Beqaa Valley, where more than three hundred thousand refugees live. Due to the legal vacuum, many fleeing people end up in the infamous Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut. Families in need live there in inhospitable conditions. There is dirty water closeby the tents, garbage heaps, no sewerage, the roads are dusty, and electricity is expensive. [5]

Assistance to a country can be provided on a one-off, short-term basis – in the form of humanitarian aid, or planned and long-term – in the form of development cooperation. The EU works to build infrastructure in the country (by building roads, wells, schools, etc.) while supporting employment and providing support to the most vulnerable.

In the recent past, the Slovak Republic has provided one-off material humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees in the Lebanese province of Akkar with the highest number of informal tent refugee camps and the greatest poverty. Our Ministry of the Interior prepared tents, blankets, mats, sleeping bags, generators, lighting kits and clothing for children and adults. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic ensured the delivery and the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Lebanon was in charge of the distribution.[6] In 2019, this aid went specifically to the town of Muhammara in the northern Lebanese province of Akkar which, since 2011, has been experiencing a high increase in the numbers of Syrian refugees, as well as Lebanese displaced persons from mountain areas. Muhammara officially has 3,000 local inhabitants, but in reality, there are 6,000 more displaced fleeing Lebanese and 10,000 Syrian people. These people live in tent camps, and their stay extremely burdens the local government with its limited resources.[7]

In addition to one-off assistance from the Slovak Republic, Slovak development organisations provide strategic years long assistance in the country – thanks to projects funded from SlovakAid resources.

5 Tóda, M., 2016: It Has the Highest Number of Refugees per Capita. We Looked into How the Small Country of Lebanon Can Survive [In Slovak language]

6 Ministery of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2019: Humanitarian Aid for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon [In Slovak language]

7 Ministery of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2019: The Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Lebanon Has Delivered Humanitarian Aid to Syrian Refugees in Northern Lebanon [In Slovak language]

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Since the outbreak of the so-called migration and refugee crisis, the Slovak Republic has been intensively involved in humanitarian activities in Lebanon. It has been focusing on preventing and addressing the causes of migration by improving the living conditions of the population and its prospects for finding employment in home communities. Special attention has been paid to improving the living conditions of refugees with an aim to assist them in their temporary stay in host countries, or their return to their countries of origin.[8] Since 2016, the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SAIDC) has supported nine humanitarian projects in Lebanon under the brand of SlovakAid.

With the support of SlovakAid in Lebanon, People in Need implements its third educational project in Lebanon.

8 SlovakAid, 2019: Partner Countries and Regions – Middle East [In Slovak language]

2. Selected ongoing projects of Ambrela members

ADRA Slovakia is a Slovak humanitarian and development organisation which operates in low-income countries and at home. It is part of the international organisation ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency), and in 2018 it celebrated twenty-five years of its existence. In addition to providing humanitarian aid and development cooperation, the organisation also focuses on the management of international volunteering. Since August 2019, in cooperation with the partner ADRA Lebanon, the organisation has been implementing a project in the field of WASH (i.e. water, sanitation and hygiene) entitled *WASH Intervention in Baalbek Region for Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Residents*[9] (expected to be completed at the end of summer 2020).

The main output of the project is the construction of a water reservoir in Hay El Shaab Wal Zahrae within Baalbek. The aim is to ensure access to safe drinking water for the local community (21,000 Lebanese and 8,000 Syrian people). So far, the local population has been dependent on the tank delivery of water by the UN or other non-governmental organisations, or the purchase of bottled water. This has resulted in reduced water use and increased household expenses. The construction of the water reservoir has already been completed. Currently, it is being connected to the existing water supply network, which will provide the municipality with sufficient capacity and supplies of clean water from the existing well. At the time being, ADRA was supposed to hold training on water, sanitation and hygiene, with practical procedures for sustainable water management and training in hygienic practices. These activities were interrupted or halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the virus-related measures are released, awareness-raising activities will be completed. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, only one such training was held in a camp for twenty-five families, which was attended mainly by women. Project manager Anna-Mária Benková of ADRA Slovakia states: "*The training participants expressed gratitude for the acquired knowledge and skills, but also for our interest in providing a helping hand and education which will translate into the care of their families. They even made an exception and welcomed us into their homes. Furthermore, they wanted to take pictures together with the project team, which they had been refusing to do before. They also offered something like a needs assessment and ideas for future projects on how to improve living conditions with a bit of assistance.*"

Organisation People in Need (PiN) is now implementing its third project in Lebanon. The history of the organisation dates back to 1999 when it was established in response to the situation in war-torn Kosovo. Today, it responds to crises in the world in the form of humanitarian aid, and also focuses on long-term projects of development cooperation, support for human rights and global education. In 2016, PiN merged with Czech organisation People in Need, and today it operates as a non-profit organisation. It is part of the international People in Need network.

From August 2019 to the end of August 2020, the organisation is implementing a project entitled *Education as a Pathway to Better Living Conditions for Vulnerable Children and Youth From Lebanese and Refugee Communities in Tripoli*[10] in the second largest city in Lebanon. The project responds to the educational needs of children aged 4-10 to qualify for enrollment and maintain their regular school

9 ADRA Slovakia, 2019: A Source of Drinking Water for a Village in Lebanon [In Slovak language]
10 People in Need, 2019: Humanitarian Aid – Lebanon [In Slovak language]

A view at the construction of a well as part of the project of ADRA Slovakia and ADRA Lebanon, supported by SlovakAid.

attendance. It also targets young people, helping to increase the employability of the disadvantaged youth aged 16-26. Through field workers, in cooperation with the SEED partner, the project provides psychosocial support to children, young people, their families, as well as pedagogical staff. Extremely important is that it also educates parents to support the educational environment for their offsprings, which then leads to better school results, good habits and stronger motivation to learn. The project was positively received by local religious, ethnic and culturally diverse communities, which resulted in improved educational opportunities and livelihoods.

During the project implementation, the organisation may possibly encounter obstacles which need to be addressed and perceived as challenges. Project manager Viola Ternényová states that the biggest obstacle is *"the deepening socio-economic crisis in Lebanon. All essential products and services are highly expensive, families prioritise livelihoods over education, and the banking system ceases to function. The Lebanese currency is unsustainable and foreign currencies are unavailable. In practice, this means difficulties in financing projects as well as in performing simple tasks. Nervousness and tension in society are growing, and the level of violence is rising. We have been operating in such conditions for the last few months, with no more resources as usual and without a larger team available. The work was extremely demanding, but at the same time, very instructive."*

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Medical humanitarian organisation Magna was established in 2001 and started providing medical assistance to disaster victims around the world based on the direct experience of the founding couple with the AIDS epidemic in Cambodia. Today, through its hospitals, Magna provides health care, medicines and food to children and their families. It has its own medical and technical teams in the field, which provide the necessary help and treatment. Since October 2019, the organisation has been implementing a project in Lebanon entitled *Ensuring Reproductive Health Care, Including the SGBV Case Management for Syrian Refugees and Internally Displaced People in Baalbek-Hermel in Lebanon*[11], scheduled for completion in November 2020.

The activities address the current phase of the crisis, while there is an assumption that Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) may increase during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project provides needy and socially excluded people with access to health care, and strengthens the capacities of health structures and local staff to access and treat cases of sexual violence. Strengthening the professional capacities and raising awareness of promoting the rights of women and other groups of active civil society is equally important. The Chaat, Youmine and Baalbek refugee settlements in the Baalbek-Hermel area still do not provide quality reproductive health services, either mental health and psychosocial support for victims of sexual violence.

Caritas Slovakia assists more than 23,000 people in need each year through ten diocesan/archdiocesan charities and its secretariat. In low-income countries, the organisation implements its humanitarian and development projects – sometimes with the support of SlovakAid, but more often thanks to the funding by private donors, church collections or with the support of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia (CBS).

The project entitled *Supporting Education of Children of Palestinian Refugees* is implemented thanks to the support of CBS for several years now. The activities take place in the Dbayeh refugee camp near Beirut, which was established in 1959 for the Palestinian community fleeing the armed conflict in Galilee. Currently, their fourth generation lives in the camp, making their living from casual work. However, during the civil war in Lebanon, the local school was destroyed and the children attended schools close by the camp. They were often harassed and attacked while commuting to school by public transport. Therefore, the project covers the costs associated with private transport for the children from economically weakest families in order to provide them with an opportunity to gain an education. In addition to transport, the project also provides them with school supplies, material equipment, and tutoring.[12]

"Thanks to the provision of school supplies, school fees, footwear, clothing, tutoring and transport to and from school, children from the poorest families of the Palestinian refugee community are able to attend school. Hence, they have hope for a better future than their parents, thus preventing the emergence of the so-called lost generation," Alena Horváthová of Caritas Slovakia explains.

11 Magna, 2018: Where We Help – Lebanon [In Slovak language]

12 Caritas Slovakia, 2019: Projects in Lebanon [In Slovak language]

Educational activities within the People in Need project in Shatila camp.

3. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on project implementation

Lebanon was already in a serious economic crisis before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated it further. The pandemic has intensified dissatisfaction with the ruling elites, and the country is now also unable to repay its debts. Lebanese President Michel Aún asked the international community for help.[13] The Lebanese population is losing not only employment but also savings. A new wave of protests against anti-pandemic measures has risen.[14] While the autumn 2019 street protests were peaceful, those of March 2020 seemed different, more dangerous. Food prices have risen dramatically

13 TASR & SME, 2020: A Refugee from Syria Self-Immolated in Lebanon [In Slovak language]

14 Daniel, J., 2020: When Banks Burn. The Lebanese Revolution Between the Coronavirus and Economic Collapse [In Czech language]

once again, with many people having lost their employment due to restrictions on movement and workplace closures.[15] Hence, the country is in real danger of famine.[16]

In March 2020, after the COVID-19 outbreak, Ambrela member organisations which implement humanitarian and development projects in the country had to reduce their activities and transform and adapt them significantly to the current situation. According to the latest information, ADRA had to halt or suspend training on safe and hygienic use of water for locals in Baalbek and the activities are now being transformed into training focused on hygiene and COVID-19 prevention. Other Ambrela members – MAGNA and Caritas Slovakia – adapted their activities to the current situation and measures in respective countries. Organisation People in Need provides education and psychological support through WhatsApp. Moreover, it provided cell phone top-up credit for families who could not afford the Internet. It also started providing multifunctional meal tickets for families who could no longer afford to buy even basic food and hygiene products.[17] Importantly, the organisation also coordinates its activities with the activities of other organisations. It further conducted a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on the project communities.[18]

Conclusion: The global crisis is affecting us all

It is clear that the Lebanese economy will not reach its 2018 value for at least two decades to come. The whole population will become more impoverished. Economists believe that 50 % of the Lebanese population lives in poverty, without a state social support network.[19] Up to 95 % of Syrian and Palestinian refugees are dependent on financial assistance. Sufficient social isolation and maintaining a safe distance is not possible in the overcrowded refugee communities. The situation is the worst for those who live in tent settlements and therefore do not even have access to running water.

Interviews by Slovak journalists[20], field development workers[21] and volunteers[22] with refugees in Lebanon show that, most of all, they now need employment to provide livelihoods for their families. If possible, many of the refugees would like to return home to Syria in the future. However, until it is safe and doable, Lebanon will need much help. The above-mentioned SlovakAid projects should contribute to the solution. Nevertheless, this global crisis affects us all (Slovakia included).

15 Chehayeb, K. & Sewell, A., 2020: How COVID-19 Is Limiting Healthcare Access for Refugees in Lebanon
16 Markovič Baluchová, B., 2020: A Volunteer Stay in Lebanon Terminated Early due to the COVID-19 Pandemic [In Slovak language]
17 People in Need, 2020: Coronavirus and Our Projects Abroad [In Slovak language]
18 People in Need, 2020: The Increasing Fear, Poverty and Children's Grief. What Does the Life of Families on the Run in Lebanon Look Like During the Pandemic? (Survey results) [In Slovak language]
19 Daniel, J., 2020: When Banks Burn. The Lebanese Revolution Between the Coronavirus and Economic Collapse [In Czech language]
20 Tóda, M., 2016: It Has the Highest Number of Refugees per Capita. We Looked into How the Small Country of Lebanon Can Survive [In Slovak language]
21 People in Need, 2020: Estelle, a Humanitarian Worker in Lebanon: I Do Not Regret Taking the Last Flight [In Slovak language]
22 Markovič Baluchová, B., 2020: A Volunteer Stay in Lebanon Terminated Early due to the COVID-19 Pandemic [In Slovak language]

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