

CONFLICT-SENSITIVE AID: REDUCING CONFLICT BY HIRING THE RIGHT STAFF

SUMMARY

This paper explores the challenges to, and opportunities for, the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity within the Syrian crisis response in Lebanon by looking specifically at how international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) recruit personnel. The main conclusion is that these practices are conflict blind, not conflict sensitive, with little to no attention devoted to political, confessional or ethnic considerations during the recruitment process. The research also found that the hiring practices of sampled INGOs are negatively affected by governmental policies, which have placed restrictions on the employment of international personnel and Syrian nationals in particular. Finally, tensions, which reflect political and confessional divisions, are growing among INGO staff members, and have at times been made worse by the recruitment decisions that some organisations have adopted in response to the government's policies.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of conflict sensitivity has garnered a lot of attention since it was formally introduced in the humanitarian sector some 15 years ago. Today most humanitarian actors, including INGOs, recognise its importance. The effective mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity, however, remains difficult at strategic and operational levels, and several agencies, including International Alert, over the years have devoted considerable resources to studying how these challenges can be overcome.¹

In line with Alert's previous efforts, the main purpose of this case study is to generate information that can support humanitarian actors in mainstreaming conflict sensitivity more effectively. Unlike other research available on the topic, the present study has been designed with a very specific scope: it focuses on staff recruitment and development practices of INGOs working on the response to the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. The aim of the research is therefore to look at what specific challenges and opportunities INGOs in Lebanon face when they recruit personnel, and whether their recruitment practices support the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity in their operations. This is carried out with a view to identifying ways to improve conflict sensitivity and therefore the effectiveness of aid operations.

The Syrian crisis has had a huge impact on Lebanon. In early 2015 the country hosted the largest number of refugees from Syria: the last estimates at the time of writing are that well over one million Syrians live in the country.² Unlike in other affected countries, such as Jordan and Turkey, the vast majority of refugees in Lebanon have settled in urban areas – initially

Box 1: What is conflict sensitivity?

Conflict sensitivity refers to an organisation's ability to:

- understand the context it operates in;
- understand the interaction between its intervention and that context; and
- act upon this understanding in order to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict.

The *How to guide to conflict sensitivity* also refers to 'do no harm', which is "an approach that ... seeks to analyse how an intervention may be implemented in a way that supports local communities to address the underlying causes of conflict rather than exacerbating conflict".¹ The two concepts are closely related, but should not be equated: 'do no harm' represents a minimum obligation to mitigate the negative impacts of any action, while conflict sensitivity is equally concerned both with this, as well as the maximisation of positive impacts.

1 The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, *How to guide to conflict sensitivity*, 2012, http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/sites/default/files/1/6602_HowToGuide_CSF_WEB_3.pdf

2 Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, *Syrian Regional Refugee Response*, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>, accessed 28 October 2015

taken in by relatives or friends, but also renting apartments from local landlords. In some parts of the country, informal tent settlements have also started to form, as available accommodation has become scarcer. The refugee population has put great pressure on Lebanon's existing resources, increasing competition over employment opportunities,

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healthcare services, and the use of land and water.³ It has also increased perceptions of insecurity, with reports of violent incidents between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees increasing throughout 2014.⁴ The Syrian crisis has also had an impact on the already complicated dynamics of Lebanon's internal conflicts, where some political parties are supporting Syria's current regime, while others sympathise with the rebel factions. By and large, the

Lebanese government has avoided assuming an official position on the Syrian conflict, but as it carries on with no end in sight, issues such as the management of refugees have become highly politicised, reinforcing existing political and confessional divisions in the country.

In a situation where conflict is so pervasive, mainstreaming a conflict-sensitive approach across humanitarian operations is paramount. Humanitarian actors generally recognise conflict sensitivity as being valuable. How it is mainstreamed, however, remains a well-documented problem.⁵ Existing literature on the topic provides ample guidance and several practical examples; surprisingly, however, there is little specifically related to staff recruitment and development. This was a challenge for this research, but it was also an opportunity to expand the body of knowledge on conflict sensitivity. From this point of view, the present case study is fully inscribed in the work that Alert has been doing in promoting the adoption of conflict-sensitive approaches in the humanitarian and development sectors, which it has been pioneering, through research and technical assistance, since the late 1990s. In Lebanon – where the organisation has been working since 2009 – this work is a fairly recent endeavour and one that is generally tied to the growing scale and impact of the Syrian crisis. In this context, Alert has been collaborating with several partners, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and this case study seeks to support those efforts.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This case study is based on qualitative information gathered through a review of relevant literature and key informant interviews with INGO representatives in Lebanon. Two main questions guided the collection and analysis of information:

1. How do the recruitment practices and policies of INGOs affect existing tensions and/or conflict related to the Syrian crisis?
2. How do recruitment and staff development practices and policies of INGOs affect their capacity to mainstream conflict sensitivity?

The interviews involved representatives from eight of the largest INGOs currently working across various sectors of the humanitarian response, from water and sanitation, to healthcare, livelihoods, shelter construction and food delivery. Informants were of different nationalities (Lebanese, Syrian and European), and held different roles within their respective organisations (senior and mid-level programme managers, field officers, human resource specialists). However, the identity of the interviewees has been kept confidential on account of the sensitive nature of some of the issues discussed. The research, including interviews, took place in Beirut in January and February 2015.

This case study provides a snapshot of recruitment and staff development practices and challenges of selected large INGOs operating in Lebanon. Although the findings in this research are informed by experiences, observations and perceptions of a restricted group of key informants, they do not necessarily represent general practice within the humanitarian sector in Lebanon as a whole. In this sense, the paper aims only to shed light on some trends and potential conflict issues related to recruitment and staffing of humanitarian organisations.

3 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, Middle East Report No. 141, 2013

4 See, for example, M. al-Masri, *Between Local Patronage Relationships and Securitization: The Conflict Context in the Bekaa Region*, Conflict Analysis Report January 2015

5 See, for example, N. Goddard, *Conflict Sensitivity Mainstreaming Efforts*, CDA, 2014

Another important limitation of this case study was that it relied almost exclusively on secondary data when assessing the attitudes of Lebanese and Syrian beneficiaries. This was unavoidable given time and resource constraints, and was to a certain extent offset by the availability of several large-scale (and recent) surveys relating to perceptions of security. However, future research efforts on conflict sensitivity in Lebanon should strive to focus more directly on the perceptions of beneficiaries, be they Lebanese or Syrian.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY AND STAFF RECRUITMENT: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Although the level of effort and resources that have been devoted to mainstreaming conflict sensitivity over the last 15 years have been quite high, little attention has been given to the specific issue of staff recruitment.⁶ According to the *How to guide to conflict sensitivity*, the way an organisation recruits its staff “may increase tension, exacerbate existing divisions, diminish trust towards the organisation from particular groups and increase security risks for staff”.⁷ Specific information on how this can happen, however, is scant in that manual and across existing literature in general. And where practical examples do exist, they are prescriptive and generic, offering little insight into how actual decisions in the recruitment of staff supports, or hinders, the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity.

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This is not to say, however, that humanitarian organisations do not consider conflict sensitivity (or ‘do no harm’) as a priority. Much to the contrary, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that organisations have pursued different ways of mainstreaming conflict sensitivity in their operations, with some success.⁸ INGOs’ representatives interviewed also confirmed that most of their organisations have ‘do no harm’ policies in place, sometimes complemented by relevant training opportunities. And yet, the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity into recruitment policies and practices remains understudied. Because of this, a more nuanced analytical framework for understanding the relationship between staff recruitment practices and INGOs’ capacities for mainstreaming conflict sensitivity is warranted.

Based on the formal definition of conflict sensitivity,⁹ the analytical framework for this study assumes that staff recruitment practices are part of an organisation’s operations and that they are, as such, a key aspect of how INGOs interact with the context around them. The framework assumes that the main interaction is, however, *indirect*: policies and procedures for recruiting staff determine an organisation’s personnel make-up – e.g. the diversity of staff members, and their capacity (skills and knowledge), attitudes and values. Through the prioritisation of certain criteria – for example, of technical knowledge over soft skills – INGOs can in other words choose the identity of their workforce. However, what determines whether an organisation is truly conflict sensitive in its operations depends less on its staffing profile and much more on the behaviour of its personnel. This is influenced by many other factors falling outside of recruitment itself, for example performance incentives – i.e. whether an organisation prioritises the achievement of quantitative targets over qualitative standards – or the adherence to standards for beneficiary assistance that are perceived as biased. Ultimately, policies such as these have a more direct impact on how an INGO interacts with the context than what takes place during recruitment. Still, it is also important to acknowledge that recruitment practices can potentially interact *directly* with the context, for example in situations where the lack of transparency in the selection of employees leads to the reinforcement of existing ethnic, religious or political divisions; and that the conflict itself can influence recruitment practices in a number of ways, some controllable and others less so (for example in regards to the available pool of eligible candidates). Figure 1 illustrates the overall analytical framework for the case study.

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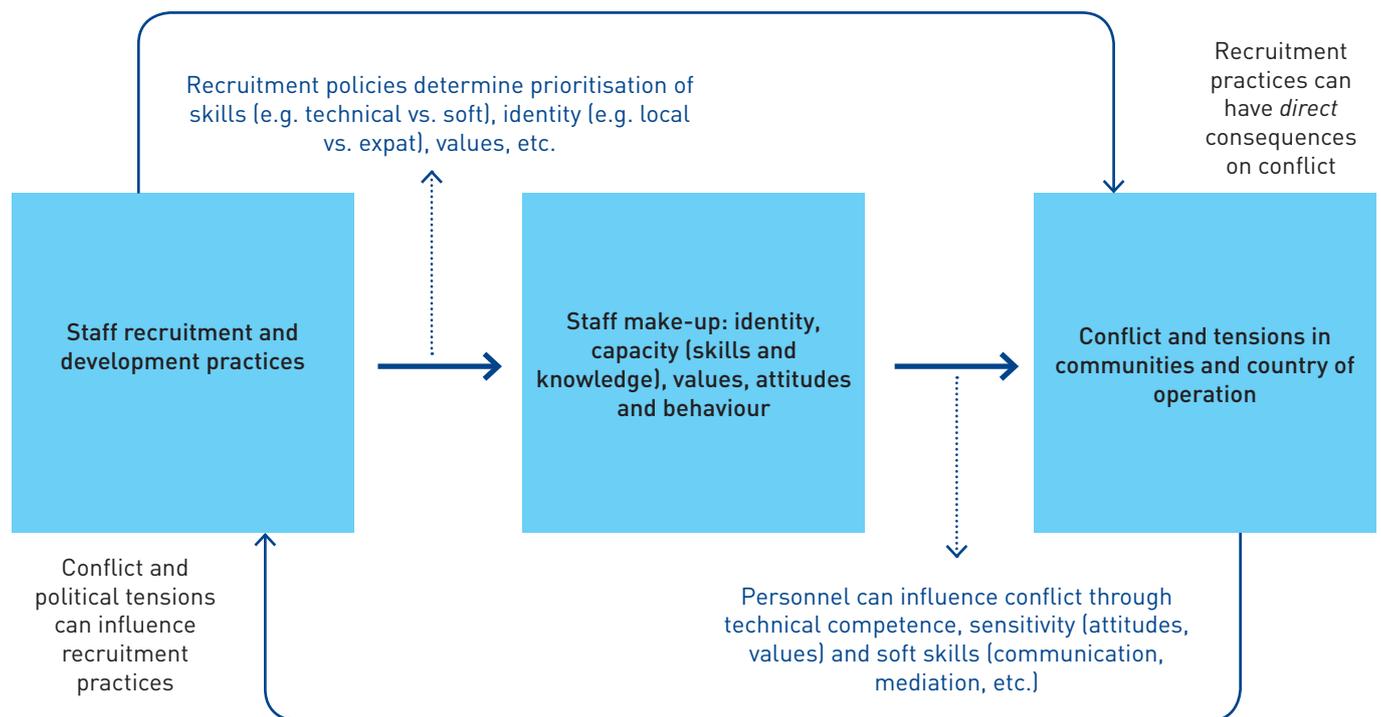
6 For the purposes of this case study, recruitment includes: the advertisement of staff vacancies, the selection of candidates based on agreed factors, the process of interviews and tests, and contracting.

7 The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012, Op. cit., p.38

8 N. Zicherman et al., Applying conflict sensitivity in emergency response, Network Paper No. 70, Humanitarian Practice Network, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 2011

9 See Box 1

Figure 1: Analytical framework of conflict sensitivity and staff recruitment and development practices



The framework is useful because, by drawing links between recruitment practices, staff make-up and conflict dynamics, it allows us to better analyse the impact that recruitment has on the context and vice versa. This is an extremely important point, and the case study provides examples of how this impact can potentially be negative. This said, recruitment remains just one aspect of an INGO's operations and its influence on the context should therefore be reviewed alongside other equally if not even more important aspects, such as the timing and reach of operations, the relationship with local partners, and the type of aid provided and its relevance to local needs.

AN OVERVIEW OF INGO RECRUITMENT PRACTICES IN LEBANON

Based on the framework above, the first aspect that this case study sought to review was how INGOs in Lebanon recruit their staff, and whether these procedures meet the criteria of conflict sensitivity. The key questions in this regard were, first, whether considerations related to the context (and conflict dynamics within it) mattered in the recruitment process; and secondly, whether these considerations were based on an analysis of the context.

Interviews revealed that, with just one exception,¹⁰ the INGOs surveyed do not rely on a context analysis to inform their recruitment practices. Instead, they mainly follow organisational policies that are not tailored to the local context, and, beyond that, they rely on solutions derived from common sense and individual experience. The first criterion by which personnel is recruited are technical skills specific to the job and sector in question – e.g. healthcare, food distribution, livelihoods, water and sanitation, etc. Secondly, INGOs look at soft skills (communications, situational awareness, etc.), which many informants recognised as being important. Testing for soft skills, however, varies from organisation to organisation, and examples abound of cases where individuals are hired without having adequate soft skills, for example in the health sector.¹¹ The third and last set of formal criteria for staff selection include other aspects of a person's background, such as gender, religion, origin or appearance.¹² The application of these criteria is ad hoc and based on common sense. For example, most INGOs surveyed seem to follow the general practice of hiring staff locally: where operations target specific communities, it is from those locations that organisations recruit staff members. However, this is not a written policy, but rather a practice inherited from previous (and usually personal) experiences.

¹⁰ This exception is significant and described in more detail in Box 3.

¹¹ International Alert, Conflict Sensitivity Institutional Capacity Assessment: Primary Healthcare Sector in Lebanon, September 2014

¹² A few respondents mentioned that candidates for certain jobs, like food distribution, are chosen also based on their size and strength, as these are deemed necessary factors for situations where physical confrontations are common.

During the recruitment process, the attention devoted to political, confessional or ethnic considerations varies from little to none. During the interview process, some INGOs include questions aimed at testing a person's knowledge of the Lebanese context; others devote a considerable amount of time to gauging a candidate's soft skills, including sensitivity and analytical skills. In general, however, INGOs avoid discussing political issues during the recruitment process, not only as a practice, but in most cases also as a policy. For example, one NGO representative confessed, "in interviews, people are asked about the technical background of a situation, but when the discussion goes into politics, then we stop!"¹³ This practice is due to the fact that the organisation in question, like most other INGOs sampled for this research, has a strict code of conduct forbidding personnel from discussing politics in the office.

Overall, the principle that motivates these recruitment practices appears to be the need to ensure the political neutrality of humanitarian assistance. In line with this, INGO policies dictate that politics, including issues related to conflict, should not have any influence on their operations, including how personnel is recruited.

The application of this principle, however, appears to be so categorical that the consequences of recruitment decisions are not only left unaddressed, but actively ignored. To illustrate this, take an example that was shared by several informants interviewed for this case study. They admitted that, for specific positions such as security officers or drivers, their organisations generally hired individuals who came from the same political or confessional group. In these cases, the recruitment process focused on technical skills – whether candidates had relevant previous experience, such as a background in military or security forces, or connections that allowed them to access relevant information – but it did not flag the issue of their political background. In Lebanon's context, however, this eventually meant that these individuals were quickly seen as being close to a specific political group, and with that came rumours of them being informants and feeding a general sense of mistrust within the organisation.

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This scenario should represent a challenge for INGOs striving to appear neutral; yet, the policies currently in place for staff recruitment are such that considerations of a political nature, even when relevant, are generally ignored. In part, and as said before, this seems to be due to the fact that context analyses, even the risk management protocols that some INGOs rely on to guide their security appraisals, are not used to inform recruitment practices. It is somewhat also due to policies, such as the aforementioned code of conducts, which forbid recruiters and managers from discussing politics both with candidates and among themselves.

These practices, however, cannot be seen as adhering to a conflict-sensitive approach. Instead, the best that can be said about them is that they are *conflict blind*: they ignore the implications that politics and conflict can have on the way that staff members in INGOs see and relate to one another, and they fail to recognise how these could then impact their work on the ground.

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THE INTERACTION BETWEEN RECRUITMENT PRACTICES AND CONTEXT

To a certain extent, whether INGOs are conflict sensitive in their recruitment practices or, as was just argued, conflict blind is a statement about values more than about performance. The delivery of aid remains a humanitarian endeavour that is – and should rightfully remain – more concerned with the people it seeks to help rather than with those who are recruited to do the helping. What this case study found, however, is that a conflict-blind approach can negatively affect an organisation's ability to respond to the changing socio-political context in which it operates, and therefore also its capacity to deliver aid. This has been mainly evident in two examples: the first is the general crackdown by Lebanese authorities on the recruitment of non-Lebanese nationals by INGOs, and the second are the tensions that exist among INGO staff members themselves.

13 Interview with INGO representative (Beirut, January 2015)

Lebanese government crackdown on the employment of Syrian nationals

In the early stages of the Syrian crisis, INGOs in Lebanon could generally recruit staff members regardless of their backgrounds and nationalities. While the Lebanese government had laws in place that regulated the number of non-Lebanese nationals that an international organisation could employ, it did not enforce this legal regime, because of either a lack of capacity or interest. On their part, INGOs were mainly concerned about increasing their operations in response to the ever-greater numbers of refugees pouring out of Syria; they therefore sought personnel with technical skills specific to humanitarian operations, but found few people meeting this requirement in Lebanon. Some NGOs also had rapid deployment, or surge, protocols, which made expatriate (usually Western) staff available for short-term assignments. Overall, the result of these policies and practices was that INGOs ended up employing a percentage of non-Lebanese nationals, including Syrians, that was much higher than that mandated by the government's official policy.

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employment of Syrians by INGOs and to rigidly enforce the existing laws. Consequentially, those INGOs who employed non-Lebanese staff in excess of the legally mandated quota found themselves targeted by relevant government agencies, which started to withhold, or even deny, work permits to many foreigners; in early 2015, anecdotes regarding the difficulty of obtaining visas were indeed commonplace among aid workers in Lebanon. By the time that the new government under Prime Minister Tammam Salam was then formed, in 2014, the question of whom INGOs employed had effectively become a highly politicised and controversial issue, directly tied to the growing tensions between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees. By all accounts, the pressure that authorities put on INGOs increased during this time. Then, in December 2014, the government announced its decision to limit various types of jobs to Lebanese citizens only, including in sectors crucial to the humanitarian intervention, such as healthcare and education.¹⁵

The government crackdown on the recruitment of non-Lebanese nationals posed a dilemma for INGOs. Either they could abide by the existing law, but wind up with a much smaller pool of qualified candidates, leading to possible recruitment delays and other operational problems; or they could continue employing foreigners above the mandated quota, but end up in a situation that could be classified as legally ambiguous at best and illegal at worst. Interestingly, the way INGOs responded to this situation varied considerably, although two broad trends can be identified. A first group of INGOs decided to abide by the existing law, adopted strategies to reduce the number of foreigners within their staff and started nationalising positions at all management levels. Most representatives in this group spoke positively about this decision, but also confirmed that it led to several challenges, mainly the difficulty in finding qualified personnel. A second group of INGOs opted instead to continue employing foreign staff in excess of the quota, using an array of informal arrangements – e.g. short-term contracts, volunteer-status remuneration, etc. – and either ignoring the pressure from government or negotiating informal exceptions through personal contacts.

Nearly all of the INGOs surveyed for this case study approached this challenge exclusively as an operational matter, not a political one.

Overall, it is clear that nearly all of the INGOs surveyed for this case study approached this challenge exclusively as an operational matter, not a political one. Certainly none acknowledged it as a conflict involving different parties with potentially opposing interests and objectives, even though the Lebanese government's crackdown was clearly aimed against Syrians. It is worth noting that Western aid workers, while also targeted, have had more leeway to continue working for INGOs by taking advantage of legal loopholes or settling for temporary arrangements. Syrians, on the other hand, have been directly targeted and seen their employment options consistently taken away: in interviews, several respondents mentioned that their organisations had been subject to arbitrary visits by government agents wanting to know the number and identity of Syrian nationals whom they employed. And one NGO representative confessed that the

¹⁴ In Lebanon, the bodies responsible for issuing and monitoring work permits to foreigners are the Ministry of Labour and General Security, which reports to the Ministry of Interior.

¹⁵ Restricting jobs to Lebanese not racist: Labour Minister, The Daily Star Lebanon, 21 December 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Dec-21/281801-restricting-jobs-to-lebanese-not-racist-labor-minister.ashx#sthash.zcvoKqSV.dpuf>

biggest problem she was having with authorities was about her organisation's employment of a Syrian national in a senior management position.¹⁶ The increasing anti-Syrian sentiment has not been confined only to INGOs, but also to many other sectors, as was highlighted in reports circulating as early as mid-2013, which documented the growing tensions between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees over jobs.¹⁷

The government's restrictions on employing Syrians could be seen as a politically motivated action that aimed to appeal to the Lebanese public but also reflected internal conflict dynamics between Lebanon's political blocs. In this context, INGOs could choose to abide by the legally mandated quota for non-Lebanese employees, while simultaneously mitigating the effects on their operations – for example by relying on Syrian organisational partners or community-based organisations rather than individual employees. Most INGOs, however, have treated this challenge as an operational matter and applied a variety of expedient solutions, which, as will be discussed in more detail below, appear to have contributed to increasing tensions among their own staff.

Most INGOs have treated the employment of Syrians as an operational matter and applied a variety of expedient solutions, which appear to have contributed to increasing tensions among their own staff.

Growing tensions among INGO staff

The second important trend that this case study has identified is a general pattern of growing tensions among INGO staff, which, more often than not, appears to take shape according to political and confessional lines. The negative relations that exist among staff members are clearly linked to the conflict-blind approach to staff recruitment adopted by most humanitarian organisations sampled for this case study. The situation, however, also seems to have been made worse by subsequent recruitment decisions that some INGOs have taken in order to respond to the limitations imposed by the government crackdown on the employment of non-Lebanese nationals.

Most of the INGOs surveyed indicated that tensions exist among their staff, and provided several anecdotes as evidence. One INGO representative said, for example, that Syrian employees regularly check their Lebanese colleagues to see if they are pro or against Syria's current regime; and that Lebanese employees can in turn be resentful towards Syrian colleagues because they assume that they come from activist backgrounds. Similarly, another INGO representative mentioned that even within humanitarian organisations there is a perception of Lebanese jobs going to non-Lebanese nationals. Tensions, however, do not only occur along national lines, but also along political ones. At least two INGO representatives said that there is a lot of tension among Syrian employees themselves, especially those who are known to be pro-regime and those who are against it. One informant even mentioned a case of bullying by a Lebanese staff member against a co-national with a different social background. In a similar vein, when Lebanese staff members are labelled as being particularly close to a political party, rumours start circulating about those people being informants for that political party, a trend that, even if unfounded, undermines trust among colleagues.¹⁸

Box 2: An example of a conflict-insensitive recruitment practice

A practice adopted by various INGOs in response to the government's crackdown on the employment of Syrian nationals has been to retain Syrians who are in particularly sensitive positions (such as field officers), but to recruit them through personal contacts rather than public announcements. This is how one INGO recruited a Syrian national to fill a position of field officer: the person had been working as a volunteer for another humanitarian organisation when he was noticed by the manager of this INGO; he was then called for an informal interview and then hired. Eventually, he joined one of the organisation's regional offices. There, some of his colleagues started to think that he had been brought in only because he had a connection (*wasta*) and not because of his ability or experience. The lack of transparency in the way he was hired thus fuelled resentment and contributed to rising tensions between Lebanese and Syrian personnel, and he himself became a victim of complaints by colleagues.

In a situation where sectarian conflict is rampant, it is unsurprising to see politically divisive issues trickling into the office and conditioning the relations that exist between colleagues. What is noteworthy, however, is that these tensions have at times been made worse by the recruitment decisions of INGOs. One particular case stands out as perhaps the most poignant example of a practice that can be squarely qualified as conflict insensitive – it is illustrated in Box 2.

16 INGO human resources officer, interview with author, Beirut, January 2015

17 See, for example, M. Christophersen and C. Thorleifsson, *Lebanese Contradictory Responses to Syrian Refugees Include Stress, Hospitality, Resentment*, Policy Brief, Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies and Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), 2013

18 INGO field officers, managers and human resource specialists, interviews with author, Beirut, January 2015

Other INGOs surveyed for this case study have also adopted similar practices in order to continue employing Syrian nationals, but none appears to have made the connection between this operational decision and the impact that it would have on the mounting tensions between Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees among their own staff. This oversight is arguably the direct result of a lack of systems (or procedures) on the part of INGOs for monitoring their operations in a conflict-sensitive matter. In this case, such an approach would have in fact easily provided very useful and timely insight into the nature of the problem and its implications, and could have also provided suggestions about ways to mitigate the risks associated with the practice. Instead, the conflict-blind approach that INGOs adopt has meant this is treated as a purely operational matter, which inadvertently contributes to increasing tensions in the workplace.

CONFLICT TRENDS THAT MIGHT AFFECT RECRUITMENT PRACTICES AND VICE VERSA

The examples just described confirm the case study's main finding, which is that considerations relating to the wider context in Lebanon – including conflict dynamics internal to the country and to the Syrian crisis – are not generally taken into consideration when INGOs recruit staff. While this failure is important and worthy of attention, its implications on the wider Lebanese context are much harder to assess. To take one example, one of the main reasons for the tensions between Lebanese communities and Syrian refugees is that the latter qualify for humanitarian assistance, while equally vulnerable Lebanese do not always receive the same level of aid. As a recent report on conflict sensitivity states, “the targeting of assistance is the most significant conflict sensitivity issue in healthcare”.¹⁹ This finding suggests that, regardless of the quality of staff recruited, as long as the targeting policy remains the same, tensions will persist. Consistent with this, this case study did not find any blatant examples of recruitment practices affecting the INGOs' wider context, either positively or negatively, as this appears to remain shaped by other, more important factors. This notwithstanding, this case study has identified three trends, related to conflict in Lebanon, which could become extremely relevant in the future, and might therefore warrant additional monitoring.

Growing tension between Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees

The first trend is the discrimination against Syrian refugees by the Lebanese, which has been steadily growing across Lebanon.²⁰ INGOs are also suffering from this phenomenon, with various respondents confirming that negative bias can be common in offices and among colleagues – mostly by Lebanese against Syrians, but also, as noted before, among co-nationals of different social, political or confessional backgrounds. There is also some evidence that biased employment practices are trickling into projects. For example, an evaluation of an initiative providing casual labour opportunities to both Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees in

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Northern Lebanon found that there were significant challenges in how the project conducted the recruitment and employment of beneficiaries. One of the project's objectives was to foster social cohesion, but the evaluation found that by favouring Lebanese nationals over Syrians, while simultaneously adopting non-transparent recruitment procedures, the initiative “created a serious selection bias that harmed the ... objectives as it would reinforce perceptions of bias, cronyism, and corruption, and would further increase social tensions between and within the communities”.²¹

This finding should not detract from the overall positive achievements of the project, which, as the evaluation shows, has successfully provided income and livelihood opportunities to vulnerable communities. But it does again emphasise that the impact of humanitarian efforts cannot be appraised separately from the wider social and political developments affecting the country. Today in Lebanon there are growing tensions between host communities and refugees, which are at least in part fuelled by mutual resentment, negative stereotypes and discrimination: “Syrians”, as one report puts it, “experience hostility and discrimination from the Lebanese regardless of the latter's geographic location, political allegiances, or sectarian identity”.²² And, as discussed

19 International Alert, 2014, Op. cit., p.4

20 World Bank, Lebanon: Economic and social impact assessment of the Syrian conflict, Report No. 81098-LB, 1-189, 2013

21 Save the Children, Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations: Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Nationals in the Bekaa and Akkar, 2014

22 Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Dialogue and local response mechanisms to conflict between host communities and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Conflict Scan Report, May 2014

already, political actors are openly manipulating this issue to further their own agendas, including the enforcement of preferential employment policies. This places INGOs in a difficult position: where they give in, they might appear to endorse a specific and partisan political agenda, and thus lose the trust of Syrian refugees; where they resist, they might fuel the resentment of Lebanese host communities; and even where they prioritise the technical implementation of activities, as was arguably the case with the aforementioned project, they still risk fuelling opposing narratives. It will therefore be important for INGOs to monitor how these tensions evolve and use this analysis to inform a truly conflict-sensitive approach – that is, one that can minimise the negative impact of their operational choices and also contribute to positive change in the relations between Lebanese and Syrian beneficiaries.

The future composition of Lebanon's humanitarian workforce

A second trend to monitor will be the evolving composition of the humanitarian workforce in Lebanon. As noted before, the government's crackdown on the employment of non-Lebanese nationals has had different consequences for different groups of employees. So, while the numbers of both international and Syrian aid workers have decreased, the former have found ways to cope with the new legal regime at the same time as the latter have seen their employment opportunities effectively disappear. This trend has had, however, another significant implication for the work of INGOs. Whereas Europeans (or Westerners more generally) tend to be employed at middle and senior management levels, most Syrians were – and, albeit in much fewer numbers, still are – recruited to fill field positions. They usually comprise, in other words, the front line in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, working both to provide direct material aid to those in need and to maintain daily relations with affected Syrian communities.

Whereas Europeans (or Westerners more generally) tend to be employed at middle and senior management levels, most Syrians were – and, albeit in much fewer numbers, still are – recruited to fill field positions.

The departure of Syrian aid workers thus creates three main losses: a loss of diversity within INGO staff; of specific cultural knowledge and sensitivity; and of access and trust among Syrian beneficiaries. This should represent a crucial problem for humanitarian organisations in Lebanon, given not just the extent to which refugees have settled across the country, but also the strong cultural, social and political ties that exist between the two societies. INGO representatives have acknowledged this problem primarily in relation to the second loss, with several informants admitting that Lebanese staff can lack humanitarian or cultural sensitivity vis-à-vis the refugees, in part because of their limited experience in either humanitarian or social work. Yet, because many of the organisations sampled for this case study have only recently decided to nationalise key positions, it has been impossible to identify the full impact of this policy on their operations, and specifically whether there is a link between what INGOs are doing in terms of staff recruitment and the pattern of growing discrimination seen across the country. Still, these two trends are both leading to a scenario where the entire humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon will be provided by a workforce with no Syrian nationals. How then will this affect the perceptions and relations between Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens? Could this contribute to existing tensions?

The nationality or identity of INGO personnel might not matter as much to Syrian beneficiaries as the assistance itself.

These are questions to which this case study has not been able to provide definite answers. On the one hand, some INGO representatives thought that Syrian beneficiaries are indeed growing uncomfortable with interacting with Lebanese aid workers, whom they often see as arrogant and unsympathetic. On the other, there are also indications that the nationality or identity of INGO personnel might not matter as much to Syrian beneficiaries as the assistance itself.²³ Still, these questions are extremely important for the future of the humanitarian response in Lebanon. Not addressing them might influence the way INGOs are perceived and possibly lead to much greater security risks for their staff and operations. Alternatively, having Lebanese workers interact with Syrian refugees might actually contribute to defusing tensions and increase social cohesion, but the quality of this interaction will have to be based on positive values, and address, through dialogue, any negative perceptions between the two groups. In general, any response will have to be once again dependent on an analysis of conflict trends and an approach that considers the consequences not just to the operations of INGOs, but also to the wider context.

23 Local humanitarian NGO administrators, interviews with author, Beirut, January 2015

Evidence of recruitment practices negatively affecting operations

Finally, interviews and various other reports reviewed for this case study revealed various types of incidents that were caused by recruitment decisions and had repercussions for the operations of INGOs. One case involved the hiring of an individual with strong connections to a local politician. When the INGO wanted to let this person go, he mobilised these connections and succeeded in blocking that INGO from accessing several locations where it was delivering aid. Eventually, the INGO was forced to reverse its decision. Another INGO recruited a local staff member in a field location and later found out that he was diverting project activities to benefit specific communities to which he was close.²⁴ The Safety and Security Committee for Lebanon (SSCL) also has several reports of intimidation against INGOs, including a case of a roadblock set up by residents in a village protesting contractual arrangements made by an INGO there.²⁵

Overall, these incidents are consistent with the statements made by several INGO representatives that recruitment practices are, to a certain extent, negatively affecting operations. However, the extent to which this may be

INGO recruitment practices are, to a certain extent, negatively affecting operations.

true is difficult to gauge with the information collected through this case study alone; and it is impossible to draw a more direct correlation between the recruitment practices of INGOs and the impact that they are having on the wider context. However, it's also important to note that some reports have highlighted a very low level of trust for foreign groups working in Lebanon²⁶ and, in some locations, even a growing support for violence against INGOs.²⁷ This evidence suggests that, if security conditions were to deteriorate further, humanitarian organisations might face very significant threats to all their operations. In such a scenario, the direct effect of recruitment on the context might become much more important than so far described, and thus require the adoption of employment practices and policies far more rigorous than those in place under the currently prevailing conflict-blind approach.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROMOTING A CONFLICT-SENSITIVE APPROACH

A first, clear opportunity for promoting a more conflict-sensitive approach across the operations of humanitarian actors is through training. All INGOs surveyed for this case study are making significant investments in building the skills and knowledge of their staff. The modalities by which training opportunities are offered to staff vary from organisation to organisation, and some INGOs indicated that these are limited by available funding. This notwithstanding, the commitment on the part of INGOs is there and the platforms for delivering training workshops are already functioning – partially as a direct response to the recognition that INGO personnel in Lebanon can be inexperienced and lacking in the skills specific to the humanitarian sector. One INGO representative for example mentioned that the average age of employees in her organisation is 28.²⁸

The existence of, and commitment to, a systematic approach to staff development represents an ideal entry point for mainstreaming conflict sensitivity.

starting to also operate in Lebanon.²⁹ The main challenge, however, is that available training opportunities remain heavily focused on technical skills and issues – such as water and sanitation, food delivery or project management skills. Beyond these subjects, several informants said that their organisations also offered training on soft skills (e.g. communication), but only two out of a total of eight INGO representatives interviewed could confirm that their staff had attended training events on conflict sensitivity or ‘do no harm’.

Training and other capacity building efforts can, however, also be very powerful in building trust and fostering collaboration among staff. People who were interviewed for the research and who had attended training were

24 INGO field officers, interviews with author, Beirut, January 2015

25 Safety and Security Committee for Lebanon (SSCL), monthly reports emailed to members, Lebanon 2014

26 International Alert, Security threat perceptions in Lebanon, Background paper, 2014, p.9

27 Save the Children, 2014, Op. cit., p.28

28 INGO human resources officer, interview with author, Beirut, January 2015

29 For example, International Alert has started to offer training workshops on conflict sensitivity, including stress management and effective communication techniques, to agencies and personnel working in the healthcare sector. This is part of the organisation's ongoing partnership with the UNHCR.

indeed positive about both the general experiences and the value of the skills that they had gained. In this context, several INGO representatives mentioned that their organisations also supported opportunities for staff to get together, share experiences and discuss common challenges. A particularly interesting example was given by an INGO that organised a three-day capacity building event that included a series of lectures and discussions led by experienced humanitarian personnel.³⁰ This case study did not explore in depth the results that such initiatives have on the relations between staff members, but the positivity with which they were discussed suggests that they may represent a good way to mitigate the growing tension among INGO personnel.

Another opportunity to support the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity in INGOs' operations, including their recruitment practices, is by making a more effective use of the instruments that most of them are already employing for monitoring the operational context. Most INGO representatives surveyed confirmed that their organisations have systems for reviewing important social and political developments in Lebanon and for analysing the risks that these may pose for their operations. Currently, however, these frameworks are mainly used to assess physical security threats to an organisation's operations and personnel; they are almost never used to inform recruitment policies or practices – with one important exception, which is described in Box 3.

The process described above represents a more conflict-sensitive approach, not just to recruitment, but also to an organisation's operations in general. The example is, however, not used to propose that all INGOs should apply the same system: the organisations surveyed for this case study are far too varied, each with its own specific set of policies, values, opportunities and constraints. Instead, its importance is in showing that a systematic consideration of political issues, far from compromising the neutrality of an organisation, can actually assist it to more effectively understand how the context is influencing its operations, and thus ensure that those operations do not become inadvertently politicised or otherwise manipulated by political actors.

CONCLUSION

This case study looked at the staff recruitment practices of INGOs working in the humanitarian sector in Lebanon and tried to answer two questions: first, are these practices conflict sensitive? And second, are they contributing to the promotion of conflict sensitivity among humanitarian actors? The answers were generally negative, although not in a definitive matter. So, while it is clear that the way INGOs currently recruit their staff is not conflict sensitive, the real impact of these practices is much harder to assess. What is obvious at this stage is that, in choosing an approach to recruitment that ignores political (or conflict) considerations at all steps, INGOs are undermining their own ability to understand, and eventually respond to, how the context is affecting their operations. So far, two important trends have gone unnoticed: the crackdown by authorities on the employment of non-Lebanese nationals and the growing tensions among INGO staff members. In relation to the latter, there is also evidence that, in seeking expedient solutions to what was seen as a purely operational matter, INGOs might have accidentally contributed to increasing those tensions.

There is, however, a third trend – the discrimination by Lebanese host communities against Syrians – the consequences of which are still unclear, but which will surely be influenced by how humanitarian organisations decide to respond to it. In this context, conflict sensitivity can be useful to ensure that the operations of INGOs contribute to mitigating the negative effects that might come from the decisions and behaviour of other actors, including the Lebanese government, but some changes will be necessary. Specifically, INGOs should consider the following recommendations:

Box 3: The benefits of using a context analysis to inform recruitment practices

One INGO surveyed for this case study has a significantly different approach to how it recruits staff in Lebanon. The organisation has a security and risk analysis, which is shared internally and regularly updated at country level, under the leadership of the head of mission. The document is based on political analysis and is used to inform all aspects of operations, including staff recruitment. In practice, this informed the INGO's decision to respect the quota for non-Lebanese employees since even before the start of the Syrian crisis. The organisation currently employs some Syrian nationals, but always within the quota, and has not reported having had any direct confrontations with authorities. The analysis also informs practices about who to recruit in particularly sensitive positions, in some cases leading the organisation to decide not to recruit staff of certain nationalities. Finally, the organisation does not have a code of conduct prohibiting political activism or discussions among staff, but tries to emphasise its humanitarian values instead. The INGO representative said that he had not seen any growing tensions among the organisation's staff or any change in its ability to provide services to both Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees.

30 The event, Spark Talks Beirut and the A Factor, was organised by PU-AMI. For more information, see: <http://sparktalks.org/>.

- Ensure that an in-depth analysis of the context, including conflict dynamics at local and national levels, informs all aspects of operations, including recruitment practices. Where expedient solutions become necessary – such as the informal hiring of selected staff members – the analysis should also guide risk mitigation strategies.
- Among the risks that this case study has identified, the tensions that exist among INGO staff should be addressed quickly and directly. Nearly all of the INGOs sampled for this research do not have practices for dealing with workplace conflict beyond formal grievance mechanisms – the effectiveness of which can be debatable, especially where the legal status of employees is ambiguous. A more effective system could also include staff town hall meetings, in-house counselling or mediation services, and perhaps even an ombudsman.
- The need to manage such tensions also has implications for managers' job descriptions and profiles. Managers, team leaders, etc. need to have skills and experience in anticipating and managing conflicts and tensions in the workplace, and in understanding conflicts and tensions in the context.
- Create the space for addressing politically sensitive issues both during and after the recruitment process. If politics and conflict cannot be ignored, they can nevertheless be managed constructively, if this is done within a facilitated and safe forum. For example, the political activism of staff and potential candidates should not be ignored, but rather reviewed to ensure that it does not translate into bias in the delivery of aid. Managing this issue can be made easier if INGOs' codes of conduct permit this type of difficult conversation among staff and managers, rather than actively opposing it.
- Provide more systematic opportunities for staff to take part in training workshops on conflict sensitivity, possibly through the pooling of resources by several organisations (to overcome potential funding constraints). Other capacity building efforts could include inviting staff members to participate in the analysis of relevant socio-political developments.
- Finally, donors should provide stronger support for efforts aimed at overcoming the obstacles to mainstreaming conflict sensitivity. Some of the challenges described in the report are in fact tied to the constraints that are often put on humanitarian actors: INGOs rarely receive funding exclusively for staff development; and the kind of research exemplified by this paper never seems to fit neatly into donors' funding priorities. Yet, a stronger commitment to these efforts could be integral in order to increase learning and improve the effectiveness of aid – not just in Lebanon, but also in other conflict-affected contexts.

This paper was written for International Alert by Bernardo Monzani.

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Acknowledgements

International Alert is grateful for the support from our strategic donors: the UK Department for International Development UKAID; the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of International Alert and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of our donors.

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ISBN: 978-1-911080-09-1