



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

VULNER

VULNER POLICY BRIEF 2: LEBANON

*The experience of Syrian and Palestinian refugees
amid compounded crises*

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KEY MESSAGES

- 'Vulnerability' has become a key term in contemporary Lebanon, especially in the context of mass migration and the frequent use by international organisations. The term's exact significance for people is, however, frequently left unexplored and this is significant because 'vulnerability' is not easily translated into Arabic.
- Refugees in Lebanon experience vulnerability as an interaction between socioeconomic and legal (residency) factors. It is multidimensional, intersectional and situational, it varies over time and the experience is deeply affected by Lebanon's compounded crises.
- Refugees mobilise constrained agency to maneuver the limited space that they have available to survive in the context of crisis. More emphasis is needed on the structural conditions that cause crises and produce vulnerabilities.
- There is limited understanding among refugees about humanitarian organisations' definitions of vulnerability and eligibility criteria for assistance. Many refugees seek to their social networks instead of organisations for day-to-day support.
- There is no solution in sight for refugees in Lebanon today. The international community must step up the promise of responsibility-sharing from the Refugee Compact and place more pressure on Lebanon to move away from a hostile environment.

In the current legal and policy discourse on asylum and migration, there is an increasing emphasis on the need to address the specific protection needs of the most vulnerable refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. For example, the UN Global Compact on Refugees requires addressing the specific protection needs of the most vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees, and the objective 7 of the UN Global Compact for Migration calls on states to 'address and reduce' vulnerabilities in migration more broadly.

Yet, there is no common understanding of what migrants' vulnerabilities are, nor of how they should be assessed and addressed. To produce scientific knowledge that assists policymakers in designing policies and implementation strategies that will contribute to reducing vulnerabilities among migrants seeking protection, the VULNER project conducted a large enquiry in 8 countries located in Europe (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway), the Middle-East (Lebanon), Africa (Uganda), and North America (Canada) – thus encapsulating different policy contexts that range from the humanitarian response in first countries of asylum (Lebanon and Uganda), to asylum and other relevant processes to address the protection needs of migrants in Western countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Norway). The objective is to reach a better understanding of the multiple challenges, promises, and pitfalls, of relying on 'vulnerability' as a conceptual tool to design and implement institutional responses to migrants' protection needs.

In a first research phase, the VULNER researchers documented the various legal and bureaucratic approaches to identifying and address 'vulnerabilities' among migrants seeking protection. They analysed the relevant domestic regulations and case-laws, and they conducted 216 interviews with public servants and social and aid workers. This resulted in policy recommendations for the policymakers of each of the countries under study, as well as for the EU policymakers, which can be found here: <https://www.vulner.eu/58198/policy-briefs>

In a second research phase, the VULNER researchers also met with migrants seeking protection to understand how they experience their vulnerabilities, and what they identify as their main life challenges. In Lebanon, we interviewed 64 Palestinian Refugees from Lebanon and Syria and Syrian refugees seeking protection and staff working in international and national non-governmental organisations. Fieldwork was conducted in three localities in Lebanon: A collective shelter in Al Koura in North Lebanon; Bar Elias Informal Settlement and Bar Elias town, both located in the Bekaa; Burj El Barajneh Camp, which is a Palestinian camp in Beirut and the camp's surrounding neighbourhoods in Beirut.

Based on the results of that second research phase in Lebanon, this policy brief proposes concrete policy recommendations on how to design Lebanon's migration and asylum policies, which effectively consider and address the vulnerabilities among refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants seeking protection.

- **The ambiguity of the concept of vulnerability**

The vulnerability of refugees is an ambiguous concept in Lebanon, which is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on refugees. In fact, the concept does not easily translate into Arabic. Vulnerability is commonly understood by policy makers as socio-economic vulnerability and the humanitarian response is centred on a vulnerability assessment led by UN agencies and based on predetermined categories of who is vulnerable, such as age, gender and disability. Generally, the global trend of ‘humanitarianising’ the discourse on refugees prevails in Lebanon, defining refugees as a category of need, rather than attaching it to rights. The lack of asylum and protection provisions for refugees restricts refugees’ residency and despite their prolonged stay in the country, refugees are understood to be only temporarily present.

- **A refugee crisis within Lebanon’s compounded crises**

The Lebanese case is a refugee crisis in a compounded crisis: Assisting and protecting vulnerable refugees in a compounded crisis where the majority of the population is vulnerable, requires a deep analysis of root causes, proximate causes and individual needs.

The crisis is accompanied by an increasing hostile environment towards refugees, a push for return of Syrian refugees and the continued unwillingness to accommodate Palestinian refugees in the country since 1948 on a more permanent basis. However, most Syrian and Palestinian refugees, while not seeing a future in the crisis-ridden Lebanon, do not consider return as a viable alternative.

- **The experience of vulnerability among refugees**

Refugees in Lebanon experience vulnerability because of their limited access to legal residency: more than 80% of Syrian refugees above the age of 15 are without legal residency. Yet, even those with legal residency – including most Palestinians from Lebanon – have limited opportunities to participate in society and can only access a limited number of occupations. The experience of vulnerabilities can best be understood through an intersectional lens, involving social positions such as gender, age, country of origin, location of residence, type of shelter, disability, as well as legal residency. Additionally, the experience of vulnerability is highly situational, related to limited access to livelihoods. Limited financial resources also affected refugees’ health situation: Almost all individuals we interviewed had themselves or a close family member chronic health problems that would have been treatable had they had access to – and could have afforded to – treat the issue earlier. Vulnerabilities are dynamic and vary over time. Most people would emphasise that as refugees they may have specific vulnerabilities but in the current crisis in Lebanon, everyone experiences vulnerability.

- **Refugees’ mobilisation of constrained agency**

Many aid organisations use the language of *negative coping strategies* to describe refugees’ limited maneuvering space. Yet, some of the interviewed aid workers were critical to this language given that refugees engage in strategies that may be detrimental because they have no other option. Our research suggests that it may be more helpful to consider refugees’ strategising as *constrained agency*: Refugees have a restricted room to maneuver and mobilise agency within that maneuvering space to deal with vulnerability in multiple ways, such as contacting different agencies and institutions, by asking for assistance through their social networks, by selling belongings and sometimes letting their children work. Currently, there is limited appetite among policymakers and humanitarian actors to tackle the structural constraints and root causes of vulnerability. The notion

of constrained agency may help to redirect the attention towards the structural constraints that limit refugees' potential to mobilise agency to reduce vulnerabilities.

- **Refugees' encounter with institutions**

In their mobilising of agency, interviewed refugees actively mobilise their agency by seeking assistance from international and national organisations. Their narratives showed that most organisations are inaccessible for refugees and provide limited transparency regarding information about who is defined as vulnerable and eligible for assistance. Consequently, many refugees interviewed felt they were left alone without any institutions representing them.

Representatives we interviewed from institutions and organisations, on the other hand, felt overwhelmed by the gap between needs and available resources. Consequently, organisations took different measures to regulate their workload and limit contact with people in need of assistance. Most organisational staff also felt bound by their funders who would operate with different understandings of vulnerability and vulnerability criteria which made it hard to provide consistency, transparency and predictability for refugees.

- **No solutions in sight**

Many refugees dream of moving on from crisis ridden Lebanon. However, there is not a solution in sight for most Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The global policies on refugees, such as the Global Compact on Refugees are focusing more on strategies for refugees to stay in the global south. However, in the case of Lebanon, refugees experience a permanent impermanence where their future status in Lebanon continues to be one of uncertainty for the future. This experience of vulnerability represents a temporal injustice that deprives individuals of control over and access to decisions that influence their daily lives as well as their future lives.

- **Unpack the concept of vulnerability**

There is a need to unpack what vulnerability means and what would be the most contextually appropriate vocabulary in Lebanon's compounded crisis, both for refugees and for the whole population residing in Lebanon.

- **Shifting emphasis to the political and sectarian aspects of vulnerability**

There is a need for more emphasis on the root causes of vulnerability. Currently, the discourses around vulnerability are depoliticised. The government and the international organisations and funders need to be open to discussions on the political and sectarian aspects of vulnerability and the existence of and need for new support-mechanisms.

Refugees we interviewed clearly identify their vulnerabilities as related to the compounded crises in Lebanon. Yet, there is currently no political willingness to see the vulnerabilities of refugees and other residents without Lebanese nationality in relation to Lebanese nationals. If the understanding of the structural conditions causing vulnerability is taken seriously, all residents of the country need to be understood within the same context.

- **Encouraging a multidimensional understanding of vulnerability**

There is a need to develop criteria that are based in an intersectional, multidimensionality and situational understanding of vulnerability that can capture how vulnerability changes over time. Within this understanding, there is a need to capture the interaction of legal and social dimensions that render subjects vulnerable.

In the current context of understanding vulnerability and using vulnerability criteria for assistance, the approach is mainly considered at the individual level and mostly category based.

- **Improved representation by refugees**

There is a need for more work to find representative mechanisms for refugees and a need for shifting more power to refugee led initiatives to combat the experience of vulnerability.

Currently, the situation of refugees in Lebanon is one of temporal injustice. Yet, there is no willingness to accept the deprivation of control over their futures and right to membership in the places of residence. Refugees feel deprived of institutions that are representing them and this sense of being left alone is contributing further to their experience of vulnerability.

- **The need for more transparent and dynamic criteria for humanitarian response**

More transparency in criteria and better access to organisations is needed in order for refugees to understand the eligibility criteria. Refugees interviewed do not easily understand the vulnerability criteria that may make them eligible for assistance.

There is a need for wider representation and contributions from refugees in understanding vulnerability criteria. Additionally, organisations must take into consideration the changing nature of vulnerability in their vulnerability assessments and develop mechanisms for continuous revision/evaluation of individual situations and assessment criteria. In order to improve practices, a broader evaluation of the relevance and effectiveness of current assistance could help improve programming according to the longer-term needs of refugees

- **Towards international responsibility-sharing and clearer government response**

The international community should take a more active part in the responsibility for hosting refugees and contribute to ease the pressure on the host countries in the region. The reality is that international policies and actions are tuned into preventing movement of refugees from the region and towards the global north. At the same time, the Government of Lebanon could do more to move away from the hostile environment against refugees that they contribute to and recognise the presence of refugees and the importance of understanding the shared experience of vulnerability among refugees and nationals in the crisis ridden country. In this context, further conditionalities by the international community towards the Lebanese state should also be explored.

THE VULNER RESEARCH PROJECT

This policy brief has been issued by Cathrine Brun and Maria Maalouf. It reflects the result of their own scientific data and analyses, which they developed within the framework of the VULNER research project.

The VULNER research project is an international research initiative, which objective is to reach a more profound understanding of the experiences of vulnerabilities of migrants applying for asylum and other humanitarian protection statuses, and how they could best be addressed. It therefore makes use of a twofold analysis, which confronts the study of existing protection mechanisms towards vulnerable migrants as they are defined, designed and implemented in various local bureaucratic contexts, with the one of migrants' experiences.

The VULNER research project is coordinated by Luc Leboeuf, from the Department of Law & Anthropology of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle a.d. Saale (Germany). It is funded under the Horizon 2020 research programme, from February 2020 to June 2023.

This policy brief reflects only the authors' views. The European Union and the project coordinator are not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.



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CONSORTIUM	Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – MPG, Halle, Germany Ca'Foscari University of Venice – UNIVE, Venice, Italy Catholic University of Louvain – UCL, Louvain, Belgium Center for Lebanese Studies – CLS, Beirut, Lebanon Institute for Social Research – ISF, Oslo, Norway Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg – MLU, Halle, Germany Population Europe – PE, Berlin, Germany University of Ottawa – UOTTAWA, Ottawa, Canada
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FURTHER READING	Brun, C., Maalouf, M. <i>Vulnerability amidst Compounded Crises in Lebanon: The experience of Syrian and Palestinian Refugees</i> . 2022. VULNER Research Report 2 . DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7152232 El Daif, C., Shuayb, M., Maalouf, M. <i>The Vulnerability of Refugees amid Lebanese Law and the Humanitarian Policies</i> . 2021. VULNER Research Report 1 . DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5541066 El Daif, C., Shuayb, M., Maalouf, M. VULNER Policy Brief: Lebanon . 2021. https://www.vulner.eu/78607/VULNER_PB_Lebanon_2021_1.pdf