



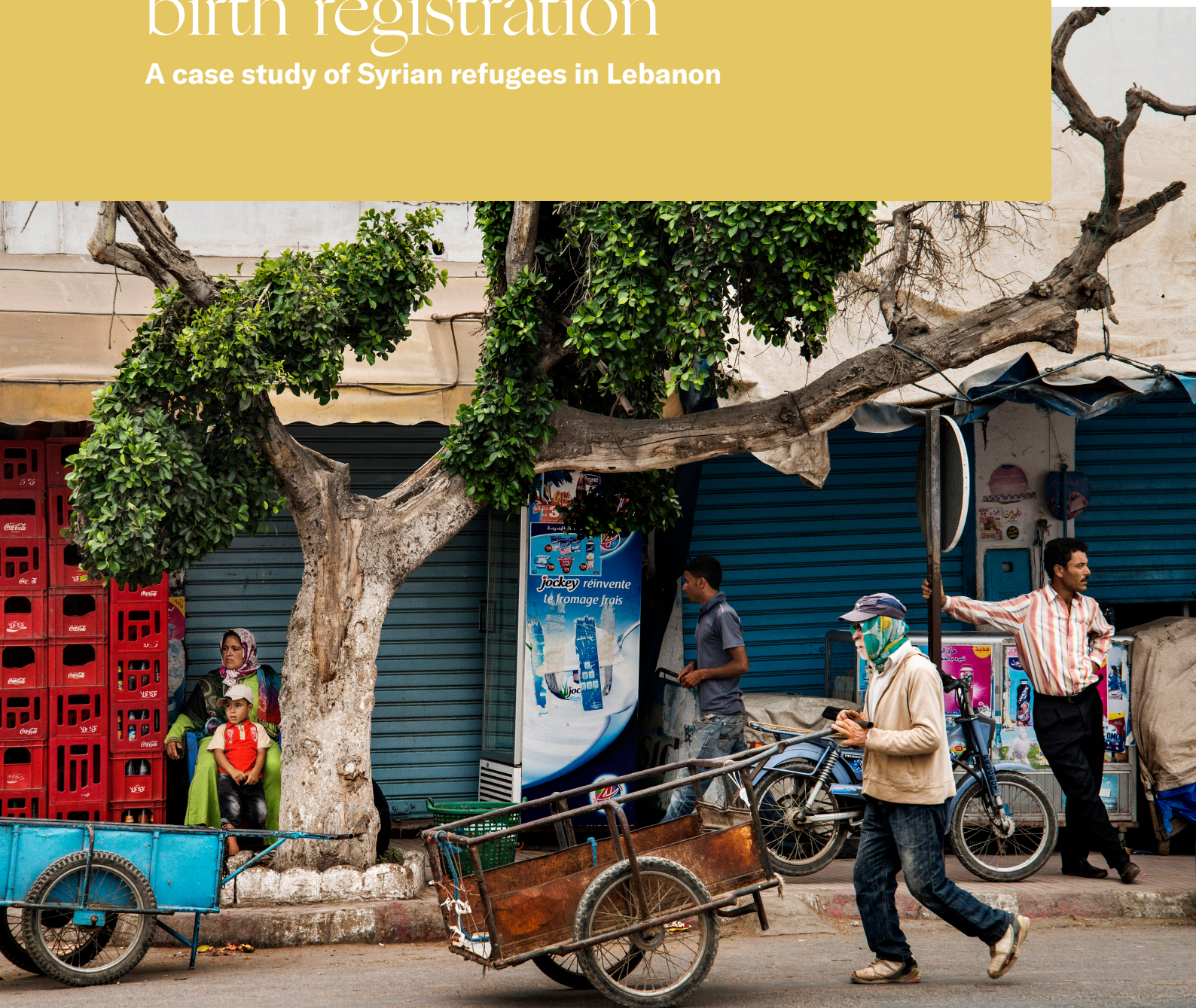
MENASP

middle east & north africa
social policy network

Policy Innovation Case Studies No. 6

Addressing challenges to birth registration

A case study of Syrian refugees in Lebanon





Summary

Since the onset of the crisis in Syria in 2011, Lebanon has received over 1.5 million Syrian refugees. With the Lebanese government lacking a clear national policy towards refugees, the latter were left facing challenges on many levels, including birth registration. The lack of basic birth documentation would potentially put thousands of children at the risk of becoming stateless. Furthermore, in 2015, the Lebanese government asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to suspend registering new refugees, making it more difficult for them to obtain formal documentation necessary for the birth registration process. This became a major humanitarian concern that could potentially increase numbers of unregistered births.

In 2016, striving to address this phenomenon, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), at the American University of Beirut (AUB), used data from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) to produce an infographic on the challenges of birth registration faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Building on this effort, IFI initiated a series of closed dialogue sessions with relevant stakeholders and experts to identify the main obstacles faced by Syrians in birth registration. The outcome of these discussions were recommendations made to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), which in turn endorsed and implemented these through circulating internal memorandums that eased the bureaucratic procedures impeding birth registration.

Introduction

Since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011, over 1 million children have been born to refugees from Syria in host countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (UNHCR, 2018). Refugees have faced mounting obstacles to registering new-borns, such as a lack of awareness about the process, fear of repercussions for lacking valid residency permits, and absence of required documents such as marriage certificates. Accordingly, the risk of new-borns becoming stateless becomes highly critical. This could potentially deny these children the right to a legal identity, nationality, healthcare, education, employment in the long-term, and their return to their homes when conditions permit it (UNHCR, 2015).

Policy background

Striving to address the challenges of birth registration faced by refugees from Syria, the AUB's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) produced an infographic in 2016, using data from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)ⁱ. At the time of this initiative, 5 years into the crisis, it was estimated that 117,000 Syrian children had been born in Lebanon since 2011 with 83% of them lacking a legal birth registration (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2016). In 2015, the Lebanese government asked United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to stop registering refugees, making it more difficult for

i. Data included in the infographic was extracted from updates to the NRC report: <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/the-challenges-of-birth-registration-in-lebanon-for-refugees-from-syria.pdf>

refugees to obtain formal documentation necessary for the birth registration process. With only 17% completed birth registrations with the Foreigners' Registry in Lebanon, the threat of Syrian new-borns becoming stateless seemed imminent. Given the lack of government efforts to regulate the crisis and the gravity of the consequences of not registering births, the IFI and its partners launched efforts to address this issue. A series of closed dialogue sessions were conducted with the relevant stakeholders, which produced a list of policy recommendations to improve the process. Those recommendations were endorsed and later implemented by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM) by circulating memorandums that called for:

1. facilitating, at the *mukhtar* level (head of a town or village who usually issues local documents needed for formal bureaucratic processes), the endorsement of birth certificates of Syrian and Palestine-refugees-from-Syria children born within areas falling under the *mukhtars'* jurisdiction, without requesting proof of legal stay and proof of marriage.
2. registering the birth at the *nofous* (personal status registry) is based only on the birth certificate given by the local *mukhtar* without the need to present a valid residency or any other document.
3. facilitating the issuance of proof of marriages at the *nofous* level by solely requesting the marriage certificate issued by the local *mukhtar* with no other documents required.

Actors

The dialogue engaged representatives from the Lebanese MoIM, the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC; inter-ministerial government body), United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the Near East (UNRWA), UNHCR, Norwegian

Refugee Council (NRC), and the IFI, who all acknowledged the level of urgency and potential long-term implications of childhood statelessness. The implementation level engaged the General Directorate of Personal Status, *mukhtars* and personal status registry.

Key institutions and normative underpinnings

IFI's capacity as a research and policy institute, and its good standing with policy makers makes it possible to convene with the relevant government officials, humanitarian agencies, and academics when addressing policy relevant issues. In recent years, the Institute has worked to underscore the centrality of evidence and facts to inform the public and guide the debate on the Syrian refugee crisis, making data accessible to stakeholders at all levels. One example is the target achieved through the infographic. The infographic allowed for the presentation of evidence and recommendations in a concise and comprehensible manner and summarized the process of birth registration in a simplified manner. It was well received during the dialogue sessions. The dialogue sessions allowed for an open discussion of the potential implications of childhood statelessness while simultaneously engaging relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process. This led to an increasing sense of ownership among them, particularly the MoIM whose role in facilitating the process was decisive. In parallel with the infographic and the evidence available, the dialogue sessions allowed stakeholders to assess the process and identify the steps where an intervention could be implemented without a major change in the relevant law governing foreigners in Lebanon.

What was innovative about the problem-solving



The convening of relevant stakeholders (including representatives from the relevant ministries) in a continuous and efficient manner allowed the approach to be effective in responding to the issue at hand. In this case, the policy recommendations and resulting disseminated information at the administrative level, targeting both the *mukhtars* and *nofous* officials, allowed for a rapid response to a time-sensitive issue. The availability of evidence on unregistered child refugee births was also a major contributing factor. Evidence highlighted alarmingly low levels of completed registrations, which triggered responsiveness from stakeholders. In parallel, humanitarian actors and local non-governmental organizations worked towards increasing general awareness on the birth registration process and the legal assistance provisions.

Lessons learned:

The initial issue was not due to a lack of data, but rather one of data presentation. In addition, there was a lack of awareness about the steps and required documents for registering Syrian refugee new-borns among those responsible for the process. As such,

presenting concise infographic evidence proved very effective in this case. The illustrative data on the infographic also laid out the steps taken by Syrian refugees for registering new-borns in a simplified manner. In turn, the dialogue sessions allowed for identification of practical and rapid steps which could be taken to facilitate the birth registration process without having to change any relevant laws.

Methodological notes:

The initial infographic produced for this project was based on data from the NRC on the challenges of new-born birth registration faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Noting the possible implications of this issue, the UNHCR collects data on the number of birth registrations among Syrian refugees in their annual assessment of vulnerability (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2017-2019). The annual assessments reflect an incremental change in completed birth registrations from 17% in 2017, when this intervention was first implemented, to 21% in 2018, and more recently, to 30% in 2019 (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2017-2019). However, other obstacles continue to remain.

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