

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: UK aid for refugee host countries, HC 426

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mrs Pauline Latham; Nigel Mills; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 1 - 45

Witnesses

[I](#): HE Manar Dabbas, Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

[II](#): Sabine Abi Aad, Communications and Campaigns Coordinator, ActionAid Arab Region; Dominik Bartsch, Representative in Jordan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); and Amy Schmidt, Country Director, Norwegian Refugee Council Jordan.

Examination of witness

Witness: HE Manar Dabbas.

Q1 Chair: This evidence session of the International Development Select Committee is focused on UK aid for refugee host countries, and we are particularly focusing on Jordan. The Committee went out to both Jordan and Palestine a couple of weeks ago, so we will be drawing from our personal experiences of those that we met and things that we have seen.

We are very fortunate, for our first panel, to be joined by the Ambassador of Jordan, Ambassador Manar Dabbas. Thank you very much for coming today. We have quite a lot of questions for you. Could I start by asking you to tell us a little bit about yourself and your brief?

Manar Dabbas: Thank you, Madam Chair, esteemed members of the International Development Committee and distinguished guests. It gives me great pleasure to be present with you today, upon a kind invitation from the Committee, to discuss a timely yet noble and challenging topic: hosting refugees.

Jordan has always been a safe haven and refuge for those in need. It is an entrenched and rooted doctrine that has been implemented for generations with pride and honour. Our story with hosting refugees is not limited to our Syrian—

Q2 Chair: Ambassador, I will pause you there, because we have questions for you. First, why did Jordan open the borders to Palestinians and then Syrians and other forcibly displaced people in the region?

Manar Dabbas: Thank you for the question. I have been asked many times since I became Ambassador to this great country and even in my previous capacities, “Why do you do that? Why do you have an open-door policy for refugees in spite of the challenges that we are facing?” The answer is quite simple: because this is what defines us as Hashemite leadership and as kind Jordanians. These are our principles, our values. This is our culture. This is our religion.

Not only does our religion command us Muslims to welcome those seeking refuge and helping those in distress; they must be treated with dignity and care. This is who we are. It was never about what resources we have. As His Majesty has always reiterated, humanity comes first, empathy transcends.

Q3 Chair: What do you think would have been the consequences had you not followed your moral and religious convictions and had not opened the borders?

Manar Dabbas: I think we would have seen catastrophic images—unwarranted catastrophic images—on the northern borders of Jordan. We felt that there was a conflict raging up north and, as I said earlier, it was our duty—our ethical, legal, cultural and religious duty—to open the borders. We have allowed people without vetting them. People came



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rushing to us without even any single or simple documentation. We have not had the time to vet people, so we do not know who is a refugee or who is posing as a refugee. Top of our list of priorities was to save and to offer refuge and a safe place for those fleeing the conflict in their country.

Q4 Chair: Give us an idea of numbers, both historic Palestinian refugees and more recent.

Manar Dabbas: Thank you for asking that question. You will probably be shocked to know that a small country like Jordan has refugees from around 50 countries in the world. We have started receiving waves of refugees since 1948—Palestinian refugees. We have 2.1 million Palestinian refugees in the country. Add to that 100,000 Iraqi refugees. In addition, with the recent crisis that started in Syria in 2011, we have almost 1.3 million Syrian refugees in the country. Most of those live not in camps, but along with Jordanians. Only 10% live in camps. You can imagine the stress and impact that this has on the Jordanian infrastructure: health, water, energy, education and so on.

In terms of comparison of numbers, if you will allow me, we have received a 14% population increase in less than a year. Looking at the UK, with an 80 million population, we are talking about 12 million people coming to your country in less than a year. You can imagine the impact that would have on your economy.

Q5 Chair: What is the Jordanian population if you took the refugees out?

Manar Dabbas: It is 36% that are refugees. The total is around 8 million Jordanians.

Q6 Chair: I know you have said that you just had to; there were just people there so you welcomed them in. How was that communicated to the Jordanian population?

Manar Dabbas: As I said earlier, we have received those refugees with open arms and hearts. Jordanians are known to be hospitable and generous, based on our culture and religion. It was not a big issue how to convince people why we need to help our brothers in the north, because we have done that earlier with many of our neighbours. It was no exception for those Syrian refugees, and they have been received and welcomed by Jordanians, even at a time when Jordanians were suffering economically and socially, and when the country has been suffering economically, with lack of resources—water resources.

We have moved, for example, from being the third poorest country in water per capita consumption to the second poorest country. The annual per capita water resource for an individual is 120 to 145 cubic metres. The poverty line internationally sits at 500 cubic metres, so you can imagine how this, at least on the water issue, has been very detrimental. Add to that other sectors as well.

Q7 Mr Sharma: Your Excellency, what were the most important



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commitments that Jordan received from the international community in the early days of the Syria response and under the 2016 Jordan compact?

Manar Dabbas: In order to mitigate this crisis we have had to deal with many channels and instruments. The most important of these is the Jordan response plan, which was devised according to calculated costs, indirect and direct, of hosting refugees, in co-ordination with international stakeholders and in co-ordination with UN agencies, relief agencies and NGOs in Jordan. To give you an example, the recent Jordan response plan stands at \$2.3 billion in terms of requirements. What we have received so far is only \$260 million, which is 11% of the total requirement.

The international community has been generous at the beginning of the crisis, to be honest, and we have had a lot of support. The issue is that this was treated as a humanitarian issue—a crisis—but it turned out to be not just a humanitarian crisis. It is a humanitarian and development crisis because it affects not only Syrian refugees who are in Jordan; it has an equally important effect on host communities, on those who are hosting those refugees, be it in cities or in the areas where refugee camps have been erected.

Q8 **Mr Sharma:** Has the international community followed through on its commitments to support Jordan as a refugee hosting country?

Manar Dabbas: As I said earlier, we received a good response from the international community in the first four or five years of the crisis. Unfortunately, in the past few years, with covid and before covid, we have reached what we call donor fatigue. But donor fatigue is not a solution—it is not an option or a choice—because this was a crisis not of our own making. It was a crisis that was imposed on us, and therefore we have been shouldering the burden of this crisis as part of our international commitment and obligations, hence the international community should step up its effort to increase support for Jordan—as I said, not only for refugees but also for host communities.

The recent crisis in Russia and Ukraine has also had an impact on the level of financing and support. I was told that you will probably be hearing from UNHCR later in the day. They will be in a better position to inform the Committee of the shocking numbers that UNHCR Jordan is facing—the funding gaps. I have just reiterated the funding gap for the Jordan response plan. Whatever is not received from the international stakeholders—the international community—has to be supplemented and compensated by the Government, which means additional debt burden, less economic growth, more poverty, more unemployment and so on.

Q9 **Mrs Latham:** Hello, Your Excellency. It is very good of you to come. I want to start by saying how much I enjoyed my visit to Jordan, which was the fourth time I have been there, including once with the Committee before. I think you are incredibly generous as a country, and I would like to say that I think you are a model that everybody should look



at. You obviously have issues, but you are an amazing country and people, so I would like to thank you for that.

I have a couple of questions. You have talked about the cost of hosting refugees, with donor fatigue. What has been the impact of that reduction in funding? Then I just would like to ask a couple of education questions.

Manar Dabbas: As I said earlier, the GDP to debt ratio has increased from 60% to almost 94%. Unemployment has jumped from 12% to 22%. Poverty, water—as I said, we have moved from the third poorest to the second poorest. It has had an effect on the job market, because 90% of Syrians are skilled labour, and as part of our commitment to the compact agreement in 2016 and, following that, the 2019 London Initiative conference and commitments, so far, up until today, we have issued around 300,000 work permits.

In education, we have 150,000 Syrian students in our education system that just came suddenly, in an abrupt manner, meaning that we have 200 schools that are operating on a double shift system in order to be able to provide education for Syrian kids. Otherwise, if left unattended and without any proper education, they could be led into the path of frustration, disgruntlement and, more importantly, radicalisation, and we do not want to see that happen.

Q10 **Mrs Latham:** You talked there about education. I do not know the percentage of Jordanians who go to university, but we met some refugees at the Za'atari camp—I particularly sat at a table with girls—and they were incredibly articulate, spoke amazing English, and their frustration was that they got to 18 and there was nothing. We heard from somebody in another session who said, "I want to do something amazing with my life, but it stopped because I can't go to university."

In your country you have some incredibly talented young people, and I am sure you do in your own host community too. Is there any way that you could see the way forward for those very talented young people to get a university education, to help Jordan but maybe, if and when they can go back to Syria, to help Syria? In fact, I am sure we would be very happy to employ some of these people who want to be doctors, who obviously have the ability. We need doctors here, as does the whole world. Is there any way you can see that you could educate more of those bright young people?

Manar Dabbas: As I said earlier, the number of Syrians going to school is around 150,000, but there are also around 7,000 Syrian refugees who go to universities across the different universities in Jordan—mainly public universities—at a time when the capacity of those universities faces a lot of challenges. Not all those who graduate from high school will find a place in the university of their choosing or the field of their choosing. You can imagine the impact that this has had on the already available chances for Jordanians to enter universities.



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Education is crucial. As I said earlier, without education, without proper skills and knowledge, you will end up with an ignorant generation. It is a generation that has been there for quite some time. I mentioned earlier that around 280,000, 250,000 births took place since 2011, so you are talking about kids who are 11 years old now. This is a generation that requires proper attention from all of us, and education is essential—it is key. We cannot afford to leave anyone behind. This is our slogan as the Government of Jordan when it comes to Jordanian students, let alone to refugees. I share your concern, ma'am, and I think it is very important.

Speaking of bringing refugees here, I would want to turn the tables. Maybe you have certain shortages in areas such as doctors, nurses and IT; in Jordan we have surplus doctors, nurses and IT specialists. One way that the UK could help, given the economic challenges that they are facing, given that there are cuts to the ODA budget, is by helping Jordan grow more and by helping Jordan bring more skilled labour to the UK. It is a win-win situation.

Q11 Mrs Latham: I hope to speak to the Health Secretary about that, because I agree: you have too many doctors and nurses and we do not have enough. Their English is excellent, so the communication skills would work for this country. Instead of us going to other countries and poaching doctors and nurses where they need them, we should be going to countries with a surplus.

Manar Dabbas: Absolutely.

Mrs Latham: I have to say that your attitude that everybody should be treated the same, whether they are refugee or native Jordanian, is commendable. When I went before and this time I met the same Education Minister, because we went to meet him, and that has always been his attitude. He was reshuffled just after we had met him, and I think he has retired now, but—

Manar Dabbas: Well, reshuffling is probably the name of the game these days.

Mrs Latham: But it is a really amazing attitude to have and I would like to thank you again.

Manar Dabbas: It is my pleasure, ma'am.

Q12 Kate Osamor: Welcome, Your Excellency. It is the first time we have met. Thank you for everything that you have been doing, and I echo everyone's sentiments today. You spoke briefly about the challenges that Jordan is having with a large number of refugees, but could you tell the Committee what you see as the biggest challenge in the short term and the long term?

Manar Dabbas: The economy and energy are the two major challenges. Water is probably the top national security challenge. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of water and how water resources have been



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degraded as a result of the increase in population, as a result of the refugee crisis. Any help and support from the UK and the international community to address these water concerns, in terms of big investment opportunities and pushing towards certain major projects that would ensure that water is provided to the increasing population, not only in the capital but in the whole country, is highly appreciated.

Energy is key. We are doing excellently with renewable energy; 29% of our electricity, for example, is produced through renewables, and we are aiming to increase that to 35%. We import most—92%—of our oil requirements. With the increase in international prices of oil and fuel, you can imagine how this will have its impact on economic growth. The tourism sector, which contributes 14% of GDP, is mostly dependent on cheap energy and cheap electricity, so you can imagine what the fluctuation in energy prices does and how it has an impact on our economy.

As I said, energy and water are key challenges that we need to address in the short term.

Q13 Kate Osamor: How is the water being degraded affecting people? How is it affecting citizens?

Manar Dabbas: The frequency with which people get water these days went from once a week to unfortunately sometimes, in certain parts of the country, once every four weeks. This adds another pressure on households, in the sense that you need to bring water from private resources and therefore you have to pay additional amounts of money to acquire that very necessary resource.

Kate Osamor: Of course—to wash and to clean yourself.

Manar Dabbas: And to drink.

Q14 Kate Osamor: Yes. How is this affecting the host communities? This is something that they can see is affecting them on a day-to-day basis. Is this causing any tensions?

Manar Dabbas: Fortunately enough it is not, actually, but, as I said, we cannot just look at it from a humanitarian perspective. That is, of course, the case, but nevertheless we also need to address the development aspect of it. I recall at one point when we had an influx of international donors to the country, people would build football pitches in the Za'atari camp for the refugees while just 2 km away there was a village without a football pitch, for example.

Imagine the feelings of the kids who were marginalised in those cities or small villages looking at what the international community was doing for refugees. They have also been hosting refugees; they have opened their arms and hearts for refugees and yet they have not been dealt with properly. It is important. As I said earlier, it is part of who we are, it is part of what defines us as Jordanians, as our leadership, the Hashemites,



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but we should not take that for granted. This is a crisis that could take God knows how long.

The issue with the refugees that we have is that 90% of them come from a certain region in Syria, which is a very unstable region at the moment, and therefore it is extremely difficult to push people back, and we are not going to push them back. Since 2014, only 55,000 people have returned voluntarily. Again, it is within the context that we are also emphasising the need to have a political solution to the crisis in Syria, to be able to send people back knowing that they are safe and secure and at least they have basic infrastructure to live with, and that they can go back to where they were, to their properties, lands, schools and so on.

Q15 Mrs Latham: How easy is it for refugees to obtain Jordanian citizenship? Do they want to? Are they allowed to? What are the routes available to them?

Manar Dabbas: We are doing as much as we can in terms of offering free healthcare and free education, offering work permits, competing with Jordanians for already scarce opportunities in the job market. I am going to ask a question. I have not seen any country that has granted citizenship to refugees, and I am not sure that is the right approach. Instead of uprooting them from their own countries, what we should be focused on is creating a conducive environment, along with international stakeholders, to allow for the safe return of the refugees back to where they were. I think that, at the end of the day, most refugees would want to go back. Regardless of the excellent treatment that they receive in Jordan, eventually, their roots are there, their properties are there, their history is there, their hearts and minds are there.

Q16 Mrs Latham: Yes—at the end of the day, Jordan isn't home, although you are incredibly welcoming. We have touched on higher education and doctors and nurses and employment prospects. What about formal employment? Are the people who are classified as refugees getting permanent employment? What more can the UK do to help with that situation?

Manar Dabbas: As I said earlier, we have offered 300,000 work permits in sectors that have always been limited to Jordanians—flexible work permits in the agricultural sector and the construction sector. Some 95% of Syrians are involved in the informal economy, which is a missed opportunity for the country and its economy. As I said earlier, the UK has done its share and, as a strategic ally and partner, has worked alongside us since day one. The UK is unique in being an excellent convener of key international players, as it did back in 2019 with the London Initiative.

Similarly, if we look at the broader issue of refugees but, most importantly, the situation of refugees in Jordan in particular, again the UK is in a unique position. We understand the current difficulties as a result of the international crisis as a result of the energy crisis, but the UK is in a very good place to do something similar to what it did in 2019.



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Exploring the possibility of bringing more skilled Jordanian labour to the UK market and also pushing certain inward investment to Jordan, which would help economic growth and eventually help in providing more job opportunities, thus reducing the unemployment rate, thus reducing poverty and thus reducing the debt to GDP ratio, would be highly appreciated.

- Q17 **Chair:** Can I build on that point that you made, Ambassador? We recognise the donor fatigue that you have mentioned, which is happening not only towards the refugees that you are hosting in Jordan but, unfortunately, around the world. Have there been any negotiations with the UK Government on the areas that you talk about—for example, trade deals that we could be doing together to help Jordanians in a different way than just straight humanitarian cash? My colleague rightly mentioned that we met a lot of very skilled graduates in engineering, medicine and IT, all of which are areas that this country desperately needs. Has there been an offer of work permits in the UK? Has there been any debate about inward investment—UK engineering businesses setting up in Jordan, for example? Is the UK or any other international community member offering you a package of support, or is it just a straight cash donation?

Manar Dabbas: Yes, cash is badly needed as far as refugees are concerned—

Chair: But it is not long term, is it?

Manar Dabbas: Exactly—we need to find long-term, sustainable solutions. The Jordan response plan is a vehicle for that solution. As I said, the UK can help in many areas. Speaking about trade, we have just inaugurated the association council agreement between the two countries, which is focused mainly on trade. As a result of the 2019 London conference, we had a taskforce meeting, which is a mechanism that was agreed to between Jordan and the UK that meets every six months to look at what has been implemented of the commitments and obligations of the international community emanating from the 2019 London Initiative conference.

- Q18 **Chair:** What has come out of that? That sounds like you have set up a six-month talking shop.

Manar Dabbas: At that conference the UK committed around £600 million, and around \$230 million that was used as a guarantee in a loan that we have had with the World Bank. It is a discussion in progress between us and the UK.

- Q19 **Chair:** Do you have a trade deal with the UK?

Manar Dabbas: We have reached an association agreement, which is the first step of a trade deal, but we are aiming for more preferential treatment and, as a result, maybe a free trade agreement at one point in time, which would help a lot.



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Q20 **Chair:** That leads me to my next question. Sadly, looking at the instability around the world, it is likely that we will see more people displaced, either internally or from their country. Looking at your experience of over 70 years of hosting refugees, what should the international development community be doing now to put a strategy in place for when, sadly, the inevitable happens and there is another exodus of people?

Manar Dabbas: That is a question that I would encourage you, Madam Chair, also to ask my colleague who is appearing after me from the UNHCR. The UN system has a great responsibility to look at this. In Jordan, we are ready to offer our expertise, to convene and to be a key player in any international discussion as far as this issue is concerned. The pandemic gives us a clear idea of what to expect. We need to have contingency planning. We need to have certain commitments by key countries put aside in the event of such a crisis taking place. But what is most important is pre-emption.

Chair: Exactly.

Manar Dabbas: How do we pre-empt these conflicts from taking place? How do we pre-empt these conflicts from spreading and affecting others? This is the key issue that I would very much ask you to consider: how to prevent these conflicts from taking place in the first place, thus allowing us not to deal with an influx of refugees in different parts of the world.

Q21 **Chair:** You say that you are ready to give your advice. Does that mean that you have not been asked for your advice yet?

Manar Dabbas: No, we have. We have constant discussion through multilateral fora and different platforms, be they regional, international or with the donor community. We have specialised platforms in Jordan where all UN agencies involved and the whole donor community meet regularly, once a month.

This is part of an ongoing discussion, because at the end of the day the status quo in Jordan is the same as it was 10 years ago. It has not changed. The whole requirement aspect has shifted, as I said—it has moved from humanitarian to development. Therefore, you have to look with fresh eyes at how to address these issues, how to mitigate the severe impacts on Jordan that took place as a result of this, and how to learn from that and apply that somewhere else.

Q22 **Chair:** Over 70 years ago, you gave refuge to a lot of Palestinians. I think the majority of them have still been unable to go home. Do you see the Syrian refugees staying a similar amount of time, or do you see there is more international will to enable them to go back to a safe Syria?

Manar Dabbas: We are working with the international community to ensure their safe return to Syria. As I said earlier, it is part of the political aspect of this crisis, which is an issue that His Majesty has been leading on—how we can find a political solution to this crisis and how we can



bring the international stakeholders to the same table and agree on a set of parameters that would address the political situation, based on Security Council resolutions and other resolutions and parameters. It is inevitable that the refugees have to go back to where they were but provided that we create a proper environment, and that is what we are trying to do in our discussions as far as the political aspect of this crisis is concerned.

Chair: Ambassador, thank you very much for your time today. May I also add my commendation and awe for the people of Jordan, who give up so much to be able to help people with less than them? It really is something that we deeply admire. I echo what my colleague, Pauline Latham, said: when we went to your country and met both the Jordanians and the refugees and saw how much safety and support you were giving them, at a considerable cost to the Jordanian people, it was very impressive. I hope it is something that others, including this country, reflect on as we go forward. I completely take your point that we need to be focused on prevention, not just on dealing with the outcomes of these awful, awful situations. Thank you very much for your time.

Manar Dabbas: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the esteemed members of the Committee. Thank you also for visiting Jordan two weeks ago, because it is one thing for you to hear it from the Jordanian ambassador in London and another to witness it for yourself. I am glad that you had the chance to go and witness it for yourself. I would encourage more colleagues of yours to visit and look at the situation, and also to enjoy what Jordan offers in tourist sites and entertainment.

Chair: We would have loved to see those, Your Excellency.

Manar Dabbas: Maybe next time, Madam Chair. We will make sure that you do that next time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sabine Abi Aad, Dominik Bartsch, and Amy Schmidt.

Q23 **Chair:** We are now starting the second panel of the International Development Select Committee's inquiry into UK support to host communities of refugees. We are joined by Sabine, Dominik and Amy. Could I ask you to introduce yourselves and your organisations properly, please, starting with Sabine?

Sabine Abi Aad: Good evening, everyone. I am Sabine Abi Aad, the regional communications and campaigns co-ordinator at ActionAid Arab Region. I am honoured to be with you today to share some insights about our work in Jordan and the situation with refugees. I would also be happy to share with you some key issues identified in the Arab region by



ActionAid, such as the prevalence of gender-based violence, the increased level of domestic violence, increasing food insecurity, under-resourcing of human rights organisations, and climate change injustice.

I work for ActionAid, as I mentioned. We are part of an affiliation present in 40 countries in the world. In the Arab region, we work in four countries: Jordan, Lebanon, north-west Syria and Tunisia. We have a long tradition of community organising with the grassroots movement and direct action at its core. We develop partnership, leading to empowerment of local agents of change to shift the power to the people.

Why we are here today? Because—

Chair: Sabine, let me pause you there. It is a great introduction but it is turning into an essay. Could I ask Dominik to tell us a little bit about yourself and your organisation, please?

Dominik Bartsch: Thank you, Chair. It is good to see you again following your visit to Jordan. Greetings to all distinguished Committee members. My name is Dominik Bartsch. I am the representative of UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. I will be speaking to you on behalf of UNHCR but also to reflect broader concerns as co-ordinator of the refugee response here in Jordan.

Chair: Thank you. Amy?

Amy Schmidt: Good afternoon. My name is Amy Schmidt. I am the country director with Norwegian Refugee Council. We are one of the largest humanitarian NGOs globally and the largest non-governmental humanitarian organisation in Jordan. We are UK-registered with offices in London. It is nice to be here.

Q24 **Chair:** Thank you very much. It is very kind of you all to take the time to be with us today. Dominik, if I could start with you, how have the living conditions for refugees and host communities in Jordan changed since the start of the Syrian crisis, and how have their needs been met?

Dominik Bartsch: Following the initial influx of refugees into Jordan in 2011 and 2012 and the immediate emergency response, we have been on a good pathway, with the generous support of the Government of Jordan, to help refugees stand on their own two feet. That is the ambition that we have.

That is greatly facilitated by the fact that the vast majority of refugees are living in urban areas; only 20% are residing in camps. In urban areas, many of them are able to support their household income through informal work in construction, agriculture and other activities. However, this population lives below the poverty line and they require continuous support—90% of the refugees in urban areas are assessed to be below the poverty line and they are struggling.



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Despite the good progress that has been made, we are very concerned about increasing vulnerabilities. There have been a series of economic shocks affecting the refugee community, starting with the impact of covid-19, the contraction in the labour market, the increase in utility costs and, of course, the general price increase that in part was triggered by the Ukraine crisis. All of this now conspires to push the resilience level of refugees to the brink. We are very concerned that right now, in this winter period, we are facing a critical period and may well be sliding into a humanitarian crisis.

Q25 Chair: Thank you. Amy, I wonder if you could build on that. Dominik has told us the issues that are impacting—the covid-19 pandemic, rising food costs and so on—but I wonder if you could tell us what the impact is on the ground to a refugee family.

Amy Schmidt: Starting with electricity, as Dominik mentioned, with the change in electricity tariffs we are seeing refugees paying twice as much for electricity as they did last year. We are also seeing significant increases in living costs for refugees. For example, the monthly cost of rent, food, electricity and water has increased by 7%. While we recognise this is happening globally, this is already an extremely vulnerable population.

Refugees are also relying a great deal on debt. On average, refugees spend 50 Jordanian dinars more than they earn, and they are resorting to quite negative coping mechanisms. They are unable to pay rent, with one third of refugees receiving a verbal threat of eviction. The most common coping mechanism for this is for refugees to default on their debt and move to another shelter, but we are also concerned about the increasing movement of refugees to camps or to informal tented settlements.

Q26 Chair: Sabine, regarding the negative coping mechanisms, you raised the topic of violence against women and girls. We have seen around the world that, when resources get scarce, it seems to be the women and girls that take the brunt of it. Is that what we are seeing in Jordan, either with the refugees or with host communities?

Sabine Abi Aad: Yes, exactly. This is what is happening in Jordan. The deteriorating economic situation is pushing the resilience of women also to break. A lot of female-headed households, small households, and people living with disabilities—especially women living with disability—are more marginalised. Because of the economic crisis and the increase of prices around the world, some women are dropping education and some women are forced into child marriage to bring money to their parents. The situation for us is deteriorating.

Q27 Kate Osamor: I have a question for Dominik and Amy. Could I start with Dominik? What challenges do refugees in Jordan face with regards to their legal documentation and status?

Dominik Bartsch: There is a protection regime, if you will, that is premised on registration of Syrian refugees with UNHCR and a



complementary registration with the Ministry of Interior. In terms of their identity documents, that system is well established and it also works in terms of all the subsidiary protection measures that we are taking.

For refugees based in the camps, there are limitations on their movement. They have to apply for a movement pass to leave the camp, which in cases of trying to secure work is usually granted. It is not an overly restrictive regime but, clearly, there is a limitation on movement.

The situation is somewhat different for non-Syrian refugees. Their status is less clearly codified and continues to present challenges in terms of facilitating their access to services and identity documents.

Q28 Kate Osamor: Amy, can I ask you the same question? What challenges do refugees in Jordan face with regards to their legal documentation and status? If you are able to, could you also talk about the non-Syrian refugees and if there is any hierarchy that you have seen?

Amy Schmidt: Between the nationalities?

Kate Osamor: Yes.

Amy Schmidt: Sure. To expand on what Dominik said, there are two elements to legal documentation. The first is the legal stay needed for refugees to reside legally in Jordan, for them in host communities to move about freely, to access humanitarian and basic humanitarian services and work permits. The majority of Syrian refugees who have approached authorities have been registered.

In 2018-19 the Government implemented a rectification process of status that allowed those who were not registered—23,000 Syrian refugees—to obtain asylum-seeker certificates, and 20,000 refugees to obtain a very important card from the Ministry of Interior called the service card, which allows them to approach health clinics, schools and other basic services. The result was, of course, more freedom of movement within the host communities; this increased ability to access basic services.

That exercise did not extend to refugees of other nationalities. For Iraqis, Yemenis, Sudanese and Somalis, the legal regime overseeing their legal stay in Jordan is the law on residence and foreigners' affairs. They can only legally reside in the Kingdom for a maximum of six months after arriving to Jordan. Following that period, they have to pay an overstay fine of 1.50 dinars a day, accumulating upwards to 500 dinars per day, unless they receive a residency permit with a Jordanian sponsor.

The knock-on effects of legal stay are quite important when it comes down to registering vital life events—ensuring a birth, a death, a marriage is registered, and that the family lineage, the nationalisation, the citizenship, and eventual durable solutions can be protected and maintained. For Syrian refugees, again mostly registered, we now see predominantly complex cases where families are unable to register those



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vital life events. This pertains primarily to cases of women who have missing husbands, child marriages and undocumented marriages.

When it comes to refugees of other nationalities, it becomes a bit more complex. Because their legal stay is not legal, they are unable to approach the Civil Status Department to register a birth, a marriage or a death, and therefore these vital life events are not recorded. This then compromises children, women and families. It puts children at risk of statelessness, and it puts at risk women's ability to have legal guardianship, inheritance rights, and a say over their future as well as those of their children.

Q29 **Kate Osamor:** Thank you for that explanation. Are you able to tell the Committee how the UK is supporting legal protection programming in Jordan?

Amy Schmidt: Yes. The UK has been supporting legal protection programming back to 2013. That was the start of our relationship with the UK from 2013 to 2021. While the NRC is no longer receiving UK assistance on legal protection, protection programming has continued but at a lower level. In turn, we are concerned that people will now go unserved.

If we just look at our case load as an example, upwards of 1,500 children could potentially go without a birth certificate. This leaves them unable to register with UNHCR and to be put on to an asylum-seeker certificate to potentially receive humanitarian assistance and other basic assistances. They could potentially be stateless. Upwards of 300 women a year will not get a marriage, divorce or death certificate, which again puts them at risk of issues with guardianship of their children, making decisions about their and their children's lives, and inheritance rights.

Q30 **Kate Osamor:** Thank you. What would you suggest the UK Government can do to help the authorities in Jordan to ensure that those refugees who have not been able to obtain legal protection do obtain legal protection?

Amy Schmidt: The answer is twofold. First, we would like to reopen the rectification process—from 2018-19 it was a very constructive process—and this time not have it be time-bound, and for it to be open to all nationalities of displaced people in Jordan. This would then resolve the matters of legal stay and allow people to receive basic and humanitarian services, and register their vital life events.

The other part is removing legal and administrative barriers to issuance of that legal and civil documentation, which then would allow for issuing birth, marriage and death certificates. This would entail, for example, allowing access to registration of birth with no time-bound requirements, waiver of accumulated fines for overstay for non-Syrian refugees, accepting alternative documents to register vital life events, and decriminalising informal marriage.



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- Q31 **Kate Osamor:** Lastly, Amy, is there a cost for certificates? If somebody needs to register a birth, marriage or death, is there a cost? Do you think that that could be one of the reasons that people are not doing it?

Amy Schmidt: It very much depends on the case. There is very little cost entailed in registering a birth, if it is done within the first year. However, if a family is unable to register the birth after one year, then they are required to go to court.

I will give you a brief example of a family that I met through our shelter programme. The female was war-wounded and had surgery in a local government hospital. That family has an outstanding fine of 500 dinars. Since then, the woman gave birth in the hospital, but due to the fine that is outstanding, the hospital will not issue a birth certificate for that child, who is now approaching one year. If we are not able to resolve that family's debt before they reach one year, we must then pursue legal avenues and represent that family in the court so that that child can finally get their birth certificate, be registered with UNHCR and have entitlements to health and education services eventually.

- Q32 **Mrs Latham:** Dominik and Amy, we have been out and we have met quite a few children in education. From your perspective working on the ground, how successful have efforts been to integrate refugee children into the education system in Jordan?

Dominik Bartsch: At the macro level, following that policy concession very early on to allow refugee children access to the Jordanian school system and to follow the Jordanian curriculum, that has helped very early on in the response to ensure that children have access to education. It differentiates a little bit between the situation in the camp and in urban areas.

In urban areas, the Jordanian education authorities have instituted the so-called double shift schooling arrangement, which basically means Jordanian children attend school in the morning, and Syrian children in the afternoon. That has secured a minimum of attendance and attention, but it has not been matched by a concomitant increase in capacity, in terms of availability of teachers and also in terms of infrastructure. Part of the understanding early on in the response was that through the support of development donors, there would also be support in order to increase education capacity—the facilities, the infrastructure.

One of the challenges that we are facing is that because of the economic crisis, the rate of school dropouts is increasing. It is part of the negative coping mechanism by which refugee households under economic constraints take their children out of school and find ways to support the family income through small jobs. That of course is very worrisome because those years lost from schooling are very difficult to recuperate later on.



Amy Schmidt: Absolutely the incorporation of Syrian refugee children into the national education system has been a very important milestone of this response, but it is also important to recognise that the quality of education is not equitable between children of different nationalities. As Dominik pointed out, that first shift of students gets about 1,000 contact hours per year with teachers, whereas if you are in a second shift in the host community you are getting about 800 contact hours with a teacher, and if you are a refugee child in the camps, you are getting about 700 contact hours per year. There is an inequity in terms of your exposure to education. The quite drastic results of this inequality are stark. In a recent survey undertaken in camps, the vast majority of children ages 11 to 12 could not read and comprehend a grade 3 text.

Q33 **Chair:** Amy, one of the things that we saw on our visit, from speaking to teachers, was that the teachers in the camp tended to be paid per hour and it was very difficult to recruit enough teachers. Is this a structural problem? If the international donor community paid more, could we have better retention of better teachers rather than just paying them an hourly rate?

Amy Schmidt: That is a great point; thanks for raising that. All of the teachers at double shift schools in host community and the camps are what we call service-contracted teachers. They are not civil servants; they are given an annual contract and often notified just before the school year that they will be employed. They are paid an hourly rate. Other than social security, they are not given other benefits as part of their package. They also do not benefit from the very important investments made in pre-service and in-service training, so there is also no investment in these individuals to deliver the Jordanian pedagogy to students. All of these factors have resulting deficits on what we see in the learning outcomes for refugee children.

Q34 **Chair:** Dominik, is that part of the system or has that situation arisen because of donor fatigue?

Dominik Bartsch: It is magnified because of the reduction in funding that we currently witness. It becomes very difficult to maintain even the standard that Amy just mapped out. We are concerned that we are facing a period where those standards will drop further and where, connected with that, and connected with the economic situation, the rate of dropouts will continue to rise.

Let me add another angle to the education conversation, which has to do with access to continued higher education to obtain a school leaving certificate and eventually seek an opportunity to join tertiary education. That, unfortunately, is available for only very, very few refugees. There are some who manage to secure scholarships on academic merit and there are some who secure scholarships specifically designed for refugees, but it is far too few. The issue here is not just the availability of or access to tertiary education, but the important signal that it sends back to the community to encourage those same parents who are



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considering taking their children out of school that there is a perspective, that there is a pathway, and that they should stay the course.

Q35 **Mrs Latham:** Sabine, can you tell us what barriers to women's employment you have identified and how they can be mitigated?

Sabine Abi Aad: At ActionAid, we work on the right to justice campaign with women refugees and locals, and how they can access decent work. For example, the concept of sexual harassment and violence is not well recognised in Jordan. People do not know what sexual harassment is, for example, so if they face it they do not know what to do, or they would not talk about it, just to keep their job.

Right now, we are doing the "women friendly" label, a new programme in which we label work environments if they are a safe space for women to work. We do so with a participatory approach. Women from the community will take leadership sessions and other capacity building, so that they can evaluate if a place deserves a "women friendly" label.

This is one barrier: there are no laws for sexual harassment and violence in Jordan. Also—Dominik mentioned education—the percentage of women refugees accessing higher education is very low. Maybe they can work in informal sectors, or they will work per day for a very tiny wage.

Q36 **Mr Sharma:** Sabine, how are you working with local organisations to develop sustainable support systems for refugees and vulnerable Jordanians?

Sabine Abi Aad: In our way of work in ActionAid we work a lot on localisation. This will give us sustainability for our project. In a way, we do capacity building for our local partners, for example in Jordan. We shift the power from our international organisation to the local organisation, and this power also will go to the community. By localisation and doing capacity building for partners, this is how we maintain the sustainability of our project. For example, we created safe spaces years ago. Now the safe spaces for women are managed by local partners, no longer by ActionAid. This is how we build the sustainability of our projects.

Q37 **Mr Sharma:** How has UK funding helped to support refugee women and vulnerable Jordanian women?

Sabine Abi Aad: ActionAid Arab Region does not work directly with the UK Government—we do not get direct funds—but we get support from the UK Government through ActionAid International and ActionAid UK. As I mentioned, we are a federation of 40 organisations of ActionAid. It is an affiliation in the work and they support us with funds.

One of the main projects that was funded by the UK was the chatbot project. It was an innovative way to fight GBV using a platform online that refugee women can access to know more about their rights and to know more about the service provider and to be linked to have



psychosocial support. So far, we have reached more than 80,000 women over three or four years. Here I mean reaching women in the community and through our online campaigns and our direct outreach within the community. This was one of the main projects on which we worked indirectly with the UK.

Another project is the “women friendly” label, which is also funded by ActionAid UK, our partner, to create a safe work environment for women in Jordan and to give them awareness about their rights, about C190, about the concept of sexual harassment and violence, and about the need to have policies in the workplace. Also, not only for refugees, we did some awareness sessions with domestic workers in Jordan and with some vulnerable women to tell them about their rights and what they have to do in case they face violence or harassment, or GBV, in the world of work. We are continuing in this. The chatbot—this online platform—is an ongoing project.

Dominik Bartsch: If I may provide some supplementary information to your question, the UK’s involvement in response to the Syria crisis since the beginning of refugee movements has been phenomenal. There has been very strong financial support that has been channelled, in the Jordan context, through the Jordan response plan. It has benefited both the refugee response—the agencies providing direct services and basic needs support to refugees—and a second important component: support to the host community. It has been a well-balanced approach. However, with the sudden drop in UK funding, the support has been relegated to a much lower level, which we have felt across the operations.

In the case of UNHCR, we have felt that in support for cash assistance, which is the most critical component to provide basic needs support, but also in many other areas of engagement. It has also led to an unfortunate perception that this is the beginning of a decline in donor support, not only to the refugee cause but to the Government of Jordan, which has been so generously admitting refugees and of course has done so on the understanding of steadfast support from the international community.

Q38 **Nigel Mills:** What impact have the recent cuts in UK aid funding had on refugees and on host communities? Have they made your work harder? Amy, maybe you can start.

Amy Schmidt: *[Inaudible.]* our partnership over those seven or eight years. The UK’s support to our information, counselling and legal assistance programme made upwards of 30% to 40% of the work that we provided. We served, with UK support, over 25,000 people a year and on a variable basis were able not only to provide information, but to support them with legal counselling and legal assistance in terms of securing their vital life events and the documentation to do that.

I cited earlier the statistic that nearly 1,500 children could potentially go without a birth certificate. That comes from our estimates. With the loss



of UK funding, children potentially will no longer receive that counselling and assistance. The same goes for upwards of 300 women a year. These cases are incredibly complex and normally require legal representation in courts. That will no longer be able to be provided by us as a result of the cuts that we experienced last year.

Q39 Nigel Mills: That sounds pretty bad. Dominik, you were talking about the role the UK had played and the money that we had pledged early on. Do you see that our budget reductions have hampered the work and our reputation in the country?

Dominik Bartsch: I can speak directly to the impact it has had on our operations. I can also speak to, in a way, the reputational impact it has had. Not only has the UK been a leading supporter of the response, but it was convener of the London conference and it has been a thought leader in terms of how we should shape the response. Back in the early days of that response, a lot of the very important discussions were convened by the UK and led to the unique Jordan compact, which still governs the understanding between the international community and the Government of Jordan. That too in a way has been affected by the UK's much reduced role as a donor and as an active contributor to the refugee response.

Amy Schmidt: I echo Dominik's sentiments. The London compact was a seminal moment in the Syrian crisis response and it has been a cornerstone of all the following reciprocal agreements, funding and advocacy since that time. To turn away now would signal, perhaps, a change in the lack of investment in the Middle East and in refugees, and it would be a shame to turn away at this moment.

Q40 Nigel Mills: Are you seeing similar responses from other major donors, Dominik? Has there been more donor fatigue or reductions in money than just the UK or are other people stepping into the breach that perhaps were not as active before?

Dominik Bartsch: Following the UK cuts in 2021, we are seeing from other donors early indications that as of next year the funding situation will be tight—more severely constrained. The explanations that we are given have to do with, clearly, the Ukraine crisis as a competing major humanitarian situation, but also with the fact that 11 years into the response, some of the activities are not considered part of a humanitarian engagement. This clearly puts us on a pathway that makes it very difficult to maintain basic services to refugees and to stabilise the population. Coming at this juncture—I alluded earlier to the very precarious point in time we are facing now, going into the winter months—it is a source of great concern. We may well face a scenario where what now is a concern turns into a fully-fledged humanitarian crisis during the winter months.

Q41 Nigel Mills: That sounds a pretty bleak situation. Dominik, I think there were some differences between the UK Government and the UNHCR on how the Syrian response should be conducted. Have those all been



resolved? Are you on the same page now or are you still having some discussions?

Dominik Bartsch: Affirmative. There were discussions a few years back—I believe three years ago. They primarily centred on the cash response in the neighbouring situation, in Lebanon. Those have been resolved now and I believe that we are in a very constructive conversation to identify and agree the priorities. The piece that is missing is the financial commitment to pull it through.

Q42 **Nigel Mills:** Okay, so we are not arguing about what you do; we are just arguing about who pays for it now, which I suppose is progress for you.

Dominik Bartsch: In a word.

Q43 **Nigel Mills:** Dominik, you and Amy were both pretty complimentary about the Jordan compact. Heaven forbid we should have a future crisis of the same scale, but have we found a model that we should try to follow in any future crisis, or is there stuff that we could still learn and do better?

Dominik Bartsch: From my vantage point, absolutely. The Jordan compact is, as Amy described it, a seminal agreement. It is the basis for a lot of subsidiary agreements that we were able to conclude for a lot of the strategic directions that put this refugee response on the right path, particularly in relation to the Government's agreement to include refugees in national systems. Here, compared with many other host countries, Jordan really has done a lot. Jordan has lived up to the commitments it made in the Jordan compact and of course has a rightful expectation that that continues. From our vantage point, the basic construct is successful.

Of course, an agreement like this one also rests on the trust that both parties have in each other. There is now a growing concern that the international community is relegating the Jordan response to a secondary concern compared with many other situations, and that therefore other tenets of the Jordan compact may be called into question.

Let me also highlight one element that was partially successful but that we still would want to put our faith in. That has to do with particular incentives that were provided for private sector companies to invest in Jordan, obtaining preferential access to export markets in exchange for hiring Syrian refugees. That has resulted in a few dozen companies taking advantage of the scheme. We believe that there is potential to revive that and to explore if there are additional opportunities to do that. That goes back to the earlier question on women's participation in the labour market, because for some of the companies, including textile manufacturers, the female labour participation was very high. That created some very positive impetus that also spilled over into the private sector.



There are elements of the Jordan compact that are still active, if you will, that perhaps we can revive, but the overarching construct—the overarching agreement—of course rests on mutual support: the continued readiness of the Government of Jordan to support the refugee response and of the international community to continue to provide the requisite funding.

Q44 **Nigel Mills:** Thank you. Amy or Sabine, is there anything you want to add to that?

Amy Schmidt: I echo again what Dominik said. With the average duration of displacement now being 20 years, we need to move much more swiftly to delivering for long-term outcomes. The London compact was a very important tool to do that. Complementing that was the third-party monitoring that took place and currently does not exist. That also helps with the responsibility sharing and the joint accountability to both sides of that agreement.

Q45 **Mrs Latham:** Sabine, do you want to say anything to wrap up?

Sabine Abi Aad: I just want to say, as a woman from the Middle East, that there are always as lot of crises, a lot of priorities, a lot of things going on, so there is always need for help from the international community. This kind of constructive discussion should take place more often. As Amy mentioned, the support should not be turned away at this critical moment in the Middle East, in Lebanon, in Jordan or in other Arab countries.

Mrs Latham: Thank you very much. Our Chair has had to go to speak in the Chamber, so I have taken over from her. I would like to thank the three of you for coming, albeit virtually, and for your evidence. If there is anything that you want to add to what you have said, you can always write to us and it will be taken into account for our final report.