

Learning and Earning in Constrained Labour Markets: The Politics of Livelihoods in Lebanon's Halba¹

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Background on Halba

Those unfamiliar with Lebanon had probably never heard of the governorate of Akkar until recently. From spring 2011 onwards, Akkar became the primary destination for Syrian refugees fleeing war, persecution, and destruction. While the history of conflict-caused damage in the region is longstanding, the local genealogy of humanitarian presence and action is paradoxically short. This contradiction opens up important research avenues into how humanitarian practices and presence have been shaping the Syrian refugee crisis, and how local people and refugees navigate their everyday livelihood opportunities by weaving a peculiar social fabric. This paper examines the labour market as a lens through which to reflect ethnographically on this social fabric.

Even the briefest stay in Akkar makes clear to visitors the chronic poverty of the region, and the extent to which local people have felt neglected by the state and NGOs over the last century. The historical neglect of this region can be traced back to the Beirut-centrism of the Lebanese economy,² and the distraction of the international community's attention by the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon.

Although urbanistically under-developed, Halba – Akkar's capital – derives its economic importance from its intermediary position between Homs and Tripoli, and from being the main market for the surrounding villages.³ Unlike other urban settings that can be discussed in terms of economic 'recovery' after crisis, Halba has never been designed or developed as a city. Infrastructure and services are poor and insufficient. Electricity, when not privately purchased, lasts only four hours per day. People only have access to two hospitals and five schools.

As a local scholar told me in Halba on a cold morning in late February, 'Halba is neither a village, nor a city' (*wa la qariye wa la medine*).⁴ Too small to be called a city, some scholars would probably define it as an urban centre.⁵ Halba's society still rests on the rural hierarchical ties and relationships that characterise the surrounding hamlets. The social architecture of power, in this sense, does not differ in any way from rural norms. The 'city' is also a

commercial and administrative hub for the surrounding hamlets, constituting a spatial continuum with the informal gatherings where Syrian refugees reside – mainly located on the sides of the main roads – and hardly identifiable as well-bounded refugee camps. The municipality was built in the centre of the town in 1998, giving rise to more traffic and stunting any possibility to open up public markets, especially from the 2000s until today.

In this paper, the market in Halba, thin and scattered in the space of the city, is a sociological entry point for examining structures and networks of collaboration, power, aspirations, and (non)encounter. In spite of its scantiness, the local labour market remains the ‘lifeblood’⁶ of Halba’s tentatively urban life. In this framework, both the unaccomplished city-making of Halba itself, and its market, are key conceptual tools for understanding humanitarian action in social, economic, and political life.

I will here discuss the increasing multi-ethnic and area-focused politics of livelihoods that have been adopted by humanitarian agencies. I will suggest that the humanitarian objective of self-reliance, on the one hand, is experienced by refugees as an unachievable social status in conditions of marginalisation and illegality; on the other, the self-reliance formula explicitly intertwines with security and social cohesion agendas, mainly intended to promote the stability of the ‘host’. Under this framework, the role of livelihood programmes is reduced to an intentionally limited provision of leisure and transfer of skills without providing sustainable conditions for local employment.

Halba and the Syrian Refugee Influx

Akkar governorate numbers 350,000 inhabitants; 250,000 Syrian refugees have registered with UNHCR since 2011. Although, according to estimates, 70% of the world's population will live in urban areas by 2050,⁷ cities have often relied on rural livelihoods in order to perpetuate their existence. Some of Halba's residents still work in the surrounding fields to earn a living, as the city *per se* does not offer a large number of job opportunities. With a total of nearly 44,000 inhabitants, local people count 27,000 and urban refugees 17,000.⁸

Most of the Syrian refugees who have resettled in Halba, mainly from 2012 onward, were people who were living in cities in Syria, not used to rural conditions: 'The rent in Halba is much higher than for a shelter, I know. But I cannot see any other way of life for my kids. The ones among us who chose the villages are the ones who used to work in agriculture back in Syria, or who used to live in quite modest conditions', a Syrian refugee woman recounted.⁹ Furthermore, while most of the refugees affirmed that they chose Halba for contingency reasons, most Halba residents think the refugees relocated there because of their easier access to work, being the industrial hub of Akkar, where food costs less than in the villages. Other refugees, however, affirmed that they already had relatives living in Halba whom they could rely on.

In January 2015, the Lebanese government issued a new decree for refugees, who were not allowed to work in Lebanon in sectors other than cleaning (now classified as 'environment'), gardening, agriculture, and construction, due to rising local unemployment.¹⁰ Exceptions were made for Syrian nationals who were admitted for reasons of business or trade when sponsored by an employer (*kafala* system), or if they owned assets in Lebanon.¹¹ Most refugees are therefore doomed to exploitation and informal jobs. Prior to the war and the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, local people better accepted the temporary pattern of migrant labour¹² and the fact that most of the Syrian workers in Lebanon were single men who used to send money to their families in Syria. The idea that the refugee newcomers have played the same role within Akkar's economy as prior to the Syrian crisis¹³ turns out to be misleading, because the local labour market has become populated by an unprecedented number of women and children over the last six years.

The geography of the historical Syrian presence in Akkar allows for an understanding of how morally painful the refugees' presence has become. As has often been demonstrated in scholarly literature,¹⁴ major intolerance is observable even when outsiders are less distinguishable from insiders. Local perceptions are illustrated by this statement of a Lebanese resident, 'They are like us, and they live even better than us'.¹⁵

The identification of the refugee newcomers – who, most of the time, fled political persecution or government's shelling – with the Syrian regime has opened a deep historical wound that local people continue to carry,

and which several humanitarian agencies initially neglected by merely addressing refugees, rather than chronically vulnerable populations more broadly.¹⁶ In this sense, the refugee migration into Akkar has been experienced at a local level as a re-territorialisation of the Syrian occupation, of which the future temporal duration remains unclear.

Both local residents and urban refugees describe Halba as a city of *ta'aisysh* ('co-existence'), a city for all. It is indeed multi-confessional, unlike Akkar's villages, and, at the same time, social tension is not necessarily more palpable than in other Lebanese regions, which are known to be more "homogenous" from a religious or ethnic perspective. This idea of local harmony contrasts with the locals' experience of unease in living with the refugees who recall the historical spectre of the *Pax Syriana* (1976-2005). Moreover, the stifling of the economic health of Akkar is locally attributed to the Syrian regime. Local residents often mention the fact that Syrian nationals, who used to oppress them in the capacity of soldiers or competitors in the labour market, can now leave for Europe much more easily than they can, due to their refugee status. A Lebanese resident found such a legal differentiation unfair: 'What is happening in Syria also occurred to us'.¹⁷

Paradoxically, the refugees in Akkar who fled the Syrian government's shelling from 2011 onwards are identified with the Syrian regime that controlled Lebanon and long shaped its politics. The refugees become human reminders of past wounds. Most Akkaris now perceive themselves as the victims of an occupation of which no history has been written. Halba is currently an undesired – yet a *de facto* accepted – site of refuge.

In light of their vulnerable position in the labour market and the contemporary local hostility toward them due to these historical legacies, Syrian refugees in Akkar are now unlikely to undertake an explicit and effective 'politics of interruption' of governmentality strategies,¹⁸ to challenge and contest either the Lebanese state or the humanitarian agencies.

The Humanitarian Politics of Livelihoods in Akkar

Mnhtaj sharaka aktar min sharika

"We need more cooperation than business"

Ibrahim Dahr, Leader of Akkar's Traders Association

Local livelihood programmes are intended as "ways to improve life" (*sobol tahsin al-'aisysh*). Most livelihood programmes in Akkar are rural-centred. In some cases they consist of vocational trainings (e.g. IT classes, make-up, and chocolate-making among the most frequent), temporary work opportunities,

or income-generating activities – such as those delivered by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) from the Lebanese Cash Consortium and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). In other cases, livelihood programmes can be components of the protection programme under emergency cash assistance (e.g. when a fire occurs in an informal settlement, monetary compensation is provided to assist the fire-affected people) – such as those delivered by the Irish NGO Concern Worldwide – or unconditional cash programmes (normally \$174 per month) and as a component of food security – such as those delivered by Save the Children Lebanon, which leads the Lebanese Cash Consortium under the World Food Programme. All of the livelihood programmes I encountered in Halba were open to both Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens, as compensation for having neglected the vulnerable hosts at the outset of aid provision in the region. In some of these programmes, Lebanese residents even outnumbered the Syrian nationals. Cash for work is the predominant type of livelihood programme designed for males in Akkar; small-scale or home activities for self-generating income are primarily designed for females.

The vast majority of NGO needs assessments are not based on specific locations but on single cases, with resort to UNHCR's registration dossiers. The assessments are therefore complementary. People formally register online after being classified as eligible. Most of the time, needs are assessed according to the specific circumstances of vulnerability (e.g. types of food purchased; housing conditions, etc.), rather than on mere income basis. INGOs mostly base their needs assessments on the survival-minimal basket expenditure for food and non-food items, which is based on national calculation methods.¹⁹

As a common rule, intended beneficiaries are normally allowed to join livelihood NGO programmes on a six-month basis. That means that they need to wait for new semester to be able to re-enrol in any livelihood training.²⁰ Under the IRC's Economic Recovery and Development Programme, livelihood programmes are subdivided into cash for work – primarily for men – cash for products (when participants sell their artefacts), and services for work (when participants work to access services in return).

The activities for trainings, apprenticeships and seasonal work are mostly selected according to market-based needs' assessment (e.g. Save the Children Lebanon,²¹ the Skill Gap Analysis, and the Danish Refugee Council).²² Conversely, the Akkar Network for Development project, funded by UNICEF and the European Union, was mostly decided on the basis of the individual preferences of the participants. This strategy addresses likely tensions between individual professional aspirations and effective market gaps.

Livelihood centres throughout the Akkar region have become focal points for job seekers, and NGOs increasingly function as informal work agencies (although they only refer people to employers rather than employing

themselves, especially for the sales, marketing, and accounting sectors). Among the programmes, humanitarian agencies most frequently organise trainings for makeup and chocolate-making, as well as coast and city cleaning and painting. Such work activities have been found suitable to the Lebanese market economy.²³ Most of the livelihoods programmes feature self-employment and informal activities promoted to guarantee survival rather than entrepreneurship: small-scale self-empowerment challenges host governments to a lesser extent, and is less likely to raise local dissent. It is also less challenging to established cultural understandings of gender roles and work tasks. This paper proposes that, in order to comply with the Lebanese government's desire of making the refugee presence temporary and enhancing local employment, only programmes meant to guarantee mere survival – at times even leading to self-marginalisation – have been considered ethically acceptable at a local level. So to speak, such programmes represent commonly approved rather than radical forms of self-reliance.²⁴

The INGOs that conduct livelihood programmes in the city of Halba rely on local partners to enhance their outreach. Most of the refugee participants whom I interviewed were not involved in other similar projects at the time of the workshop, or had never been before. Even so, the Syrian refugees I interviewed illustrated how some outreach strategies can end up being problematic. Some of their acquaintances had never heard about the possibility of joining livelihood-aimed activities. The NGO outreach strategies have been described as based on word of mouth rather than official announcements via SMS, street leaflets or other information provision in the public space, or with UNHCR reaching every registered person. As a local aid worker commented, 'Each of these projects in Akkar is budgeted and designed as relatively small. We fear having to deal with big numbers, and therefore with competition and resulting social tension'.²⁵

The humanitarian politics of livelihoods has however changed in Lebanon over the last six years. While participants in livelihood programmes used to earn cash when providing part-time work on a task-by-task basis, now the government discourages this practice. Usually Lebanese and Syrian males are selected by INGOs and UN agencies for temporary work missions, to earn \$150 on a monthly basis (for five hours of work per day and for the duration of ten days per month).²⁶

Similarly, humanitarian discourse around refugee livelihoods has changed. In autumn 2016, UNDP attempted to open a public market to revive commercial activities in Halba, in agreement with local authorities. The project was promoted under the 2013 Lebanon Host Communities Support project, whose aim is to improve the territory. For political reasons, cash for work programmes had to be renamed 'community support', following a governmental statement.²⁷

Having the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs as a partner, the initiative is aimed at supporting Lebanese host communities who struggle to cope with the additional burden in an already harsh socio-economic environment. Set in 6,000m² of public space, the market has the capacity to accommodate the approximately 390 traders yearly who come from 216 villages in Akkar. The public market facility was supposed to be operational seven days a week ‘serving all residents of the area’.²⁸

The purpose was to create a space in which local merchants, cooperatives, and entrepreneurs could meet with consumers, encourage trade, and revive the area economically. The UNDP public market apparently opened for only four days after its inauguration.²⁹ The market is located in an area that is difficult to reach by public transport, and a sizeable number of traders did not even find out about it until its inauguration.³⁰ To show me the abandoned market site, the deputy mayor drove me along a small street in the countryside, neither easily visible nor inhabited.

On the occasion of the public market of Halba, UNDP had also provided support to the municipality in financial management and capacity building, to ensure an autonomous and longstanding management of the market.³¹ However, such trainings are locally deemed to have low efficacy and no sustainability. The mayor and the deputy mayor agreed. ‘These trainings simply remain on paper [pointing to an exhibited official certificate the municipality had obtained after a workshop]. Our deprivation is not healable this way’,³² the mayor said. This points to the slippery and late encounter between city authorities and humanitarian actors.

Temporary work opportunities are increasingly being provided for Lebanese and Syrian nationals, according to the aid workers I interviewed. This is done to reverse the previous tendency of providing aid exclusively to Syrian refugees. However, even as vulnerabilities are being identified regardless of social group, and services and needs are no longer ‘ethnicised’, tensions and the need for social cohesion are still particularly identified in ethnically and religiously mixed areas. Although humanitarian agencies have recently become aware of the significance of ignoring host communities’ needs,³³ the current tendency to associate tensions with ethnic hybridity results in a new ‘ethnicisation’ of care. The reification of the host-refugee dichotomy, in this sense, formalises the perception of tension between these social groups, paradoxically incentivising the behaviour some humanitarian projects aim to avoid.³⁴

Employing Self-Reliance as a Social Cohesion Regime

While the idea of human security shifts the focus from the state to the individual, the mission to save lives and alleviate suffering in protracted crises needs to entail the concept of a future. But the ideal of self-reliance, and the language of resilient livelihoods, create a framework that fits very well with neoliberal models of governance and individual responsibility.

I will illustrate how refugees are now approached as full agents and *need to become* independent, while, in practice, their protracted refugee status renders their learnt skills a purely symbolic value. Misery and financial hardships that unify Lebanese residents and Syrian refugees are very identifiable on the ground. Members of both groups live in the same financial and housing conditions. Self-reliance, in this sense, is not the absent key to social cohesion and stability in protracted crises. The response that Akkari society was independently providing to the first arrivals from Syria, in 2011, was already an encounter between long-standing self-reliant subjects. Local vulnerability in Akkar was in fact recognised only when the Syrian refugee crisis became protracted, and compensatory mechanisms were activated by INGOs in order to better and preserve refugees' lives in the countries neighbouring the crisis rather than focusing humanitarian action on resettlement programmes. This explains how humanitarian livelihood programmes are today inscribed in a framework of compensatory mechanisms, meant to address the frictions caused in Akkar by an existing ethnocentric system of provision.³⁵

Self-reliance – translated and interpreted as “self-sufficiency” in Arabic, *iktifa' adh-dhat* – is considered by refugees neither achievable nor conceivable in the Lebanese context. According to fieldwork findings, self-reliance is an invented category, which aims to measure the impact of humanitarian intervention and the levels of dependency on external support throughout time, emphasising the need to make sources of livelihoods ‘resilient’ in contexts of chronic crisis.³⁶ I will seek to show how self-reliance, in this framework, is aimed at serving the public good, and becomes a sort of inter-ethnic promotion of the stability of the ‘host’.

I interviewed three Syrian refugee women and a Lebanese woman who were attending a livelihood programme; one Syrian refugee man with no access to livelihood programmes due to physical impairment; a Lebanese woman with no access to livelihood programmes because of ethnocentric assistance regimes; and one Syrian refugee male participant in a cash for work programme. Most of the refugee interviewees do not define themselves as self-reliant and economically self-sufficient, viewing self-reliance as an existential status that can hardly be achieved during the chronic waiting to which they are doomed (perceived as a purgatory-like ‘waiting’ even when they manage to properly settle down in host societies). Most of them say they depend on NGOs' support, and remittances from relatives who resettled in other host countries

and better sustain themselves; or they incur debts, they accept exploitation, or promise future payments. The refugee economy in Halba revolves around food vouchers, which they often sell to be able to purchase goods more expensive than everyday food (such as shampoo, baby pads, and other toilet items). In this vein, refugees discuss self-reliance by mentioning a series of economic deficiencies.

The pre-existing presence of Syrian workers in the local labour market has, in the best of cases, provided the refugee newcomers with the possibility of renting a piece of land on which to build their own tent for a cheaper price. In most cases, in fact, the refugees reside in specific locations due to their direct or indirect connections with the local landowner. Nevertheless, Syrian returnees who went back to Akkar after the beginning of the war had no other resources and social capital to rely on, even though some of them had already known the region, worked in the region, or were even born in the region. Moreover, my findings show that financial management in Halba's everyday life is conducted per household rather than on the basis of family ties. Cousins and siblings, among the refugees, do not necessarily support each other. Nevertheless, most of the livelihood programmes proved to be individual-focused rather than attempting to support collective forms of (un) salaried labour. A small percentage of refugees work on a regular basis, with formal contracts, and with a salary that allows them to pay for their living. On the whole, the Syrian refugees I interviewed believed that more Lebanese people work in the informal market by choice instead: 'If I did something like selling products in the black market, as a Syrian, I would get arrested'.³⁷

I attended a chocolate-making training financed by the European Union and UNICEF over four weeks. The training was managed by the local NGO Akkar Network for Development,³⁸ which runs several livelihood programmes in the Akkar region in partnership with INGOs. The workshop took place twice a week for three months. Among the trainees were seven Syrian women and three Lebanese women, all having their transportation expenses covered. Chocolate-making has been a success story in the Syrian refugee diaspora in Canada and Germany, their business success having been branded in the media with the motto 'peace by chocolate'.³⁹

Most of the trainees found out about the workshop from speaking with neighbours; through the school of their kids, which sponsored it; through the driver of an NGO who used to drive participants to past workshops; or through relatives who were planning to attend. The NGO also uses community gatekeepers and informal communication to reach out to people. As a result, the vast majority of the Syrian refugee women who attended were from the same region in Syria (Tel Kalakh, by the northern Lebanese border).

On the one hand, the attendance of Syrians and Lebanese, although in uneven number, conveyed the apparent desire from the donors' side to create a new social membership of those willing to work in the chocolate-making

sector. Ironically, most of the trainees actually came from the same village and already knew each other, so were unable to generate a new cohesive social group. On the other hand, according to the refugees and the local residents I interviewed, such programmes may cause further job competition within the same sector, further fuelling inter-group as much as in-group frictions.

The refugee and local women who attended the chocolate-making workshop expressed and suffered from similar material vulnerabilities. Syrian women had not worked in Syria since, at that time, they had no need and dedicated themselves to child-rearing. Expectations about livelihood programmes were however quite diverse, ranging from the desire or the desperate need to find a job, to approaching the workshop as a mere leisure activity in acknowledgment of the fact that Akkar's economy would not eventually guarantee a place for them in the labour market, amid the legal constraints for refugees in Lebanon. Most of the time, the kind of labour that beneficiaries were envisioning was home-based and small-scale, aimed at mere survival or integration of the family income (e.g. selling chocolates to neighbours).

While a Lebanese trainee woman was struggling to define her ambivalent economic status during the interview, she later explained in the following way:

It's lucky my husband owns the house I'm presently living in with my eight kids. I see him every six months. I think he got married to someone else after I lost my waitressing job. He comes to leave some money from time to time, but it's not enough. I usually roll grape leaves (awra' al-'enab) for the neighbours when they organise big dinners. They normally give me 5,000 LL (nearly \$3.32) to roll 1 kg of leaves. It's about 2 hours of work... Overall, however, I'm optimistic. I really hope I'll be able to make chocolates and sell them to the neighbours.⁴⁰

Poor Lebanese residents can therefore approach livelihoods programmes as future work opportunities, without the legal constraints affecting Syrian nationals, who view self-reliance as a mirage, an unrealisable objective and an unachievable status. The work permit is partially forbidden in Lebanon, and such a ban on working is clearly written on the document they need to sign when they renew their permit of stay.⁴¹

Overall, the chocolate-making was approached as a potential way of making some income, but not becoming the leading financial support in the household. For refugees especially, it was often approached as a leisure activity, a way to meet other people, to not be locked in the house, and fill up the day with a new activity. The Lebanese women who attended the workshop, by contrast, used to work in the past, and lost their jobs for different reasons. Unemployment was therefore the factor that induced them to participate.

I remotely followed up with the women trainees who had terminated the workshop at the time of writing. None of them had managed to arrange even small-scale sales of chocolates, despite the will of some of them to do so. In hindsight, the programme generated neither frictions nor cohesion among the few new acquaintances established during the workshop, being a short-term response aimed at social stability while not offering any longer-term strategic effects for addressing displacement in the city.

Self-reliance and livelihood programmes offer a spectrum of understanding how people own or build their access to resources, services, and rights granted or denied to particular groups.⁴² It reminds all actors involved that there needs to be a plan for the future, which certainly cannot exclude people's political impetus to pursue greater changes on the ground. Such plans for the future should be adequately approached as a multi-scale effort. The following cases suggest how self-reliance is household-oriented rather than being an individual way or a family-unit-oriented way of coping and producing self-sustainability.

Mohammad,⁴³ originally from Aleppo (northern Syria), has been in Halba for 4 years. He used to be a tiler, but he now suffers from a slipped disc and cannot work at all. Mohammad's sister is a widow and is rearing her four children (whom they call 'orphans') since the father's death in an incident at work one year before. Mohammad's family, along with his sister and her three children, live together to support each other. His sister receives help from local charities to take care of the fatherless children. Both families sell the WFP food vouchers (\$27 per month per member of household) to be able to pay the rent (\$130 with electricity bills included). Being eleven household members, they can sell \$297 of vouchers per month to Lebanese neighbours, who crave financial support for everyday shopping expenses. Mohammad specified: 'We're able to save some money to get cheap food, but the rent needs much more. With no work, there is no alternative'.

Abdallah,⁴⁴ a Syrian refugee, instead benefited from an international cash for work programme in Halba, which entailed cleaning the city in agreement with the municipality. The programme included three Lebanese and nine Syrians, and ran for thirty days over a period of three months. Each worker was paid a salary of nearly \$20 per day. Clearly, such a programme does not constitute long-term strategy, despite being development-focused in its design.

Having arrived in Halba with his wife and three children through the 'Arsal border-crossing, Abdallah bribed the Jabhat an-Nusra armed group (currently known as Jabhat Fath ash-Sham) to negotiate their passage with the Syrian regime. The relocation to Halba was financially devastating. Even though Abdallah's family receives food vouchers from UNHCR – now through an e-card – they remain unable to pay for baby pads, land rent, shelter replacement material, and bills:

I can do only light work now, because I got injured here in Lebanon – [showing a deep wound on his left arm] – so the cleaning work programme was the best option for me. Three months after the cash for work, however, my life got back to the way it used to be before. I used to be a driver in Syria, and I wish I could do the same job here. My driving licence remained in my house under shelling. It would be too costly to purchase a new one in Lebanon.

Apart from the temporary nature of the job opportunity he was given, Abdallah's experience is consistent with research showing⁴⁵ that cash provides only an ephemeral sense of normality in everyday life. His relatives in Amman were able to send money via Western Union from time to time, until his brother was injured at work without insurance covering medical treatment. As a consequence, Abdallah had not been paying the rent for three months, and feared eviction. 'Our self-sufficiency means leading an indoor life, and consuming as little as possible'.⁴⁶

According to all of the aid workers I interviewed, cash for work programmes have not had a significant effect on either the local economy or refugee self-reliance mechanisms. According to the aid workers, such programmes have however helped to improve the Akkar landscape and environment, such as the coast-cleaning project from al-Abdeh to Arida (northern border-crossing with Syria). The short time-frame of the livelihood programmes was mentioned as the first problematic factor. Despite such limitations, the coast-cleaning project, employing vulnerable citizens and forced migrants while improving local areas, provides an example of the delayed collaboration between the urban environment and the humanitarian system.

Labour-market regulations and institutions are now commonly seen as the key to underpinning collective efforts, cooperation, and a sense of sameness and social belonging.⁴⁷ The search for economic homogeneity in the labour market for different and multinational social classes is therefore used by humanitarian agencies as a guarantee of social cohesion and, in turn, stability. By this token, if the Halba market is structurally hierarchical, historically relying on the cheap labour of Syrian workers, current humanitarian interventions reproduce the gendered and hierarchical relationships between market actors, in order to create realistic job opportunities for locals and refugees.

The interviews conducted with the aid workers show that survival and livelihoods have gradually been reconfigured under the terms of securitisation, validating the argument of Wacquant⁴⁸ that the welfare state dismantlement has led to a 'government of social insecurity' and 'prisonfare'. By preserving the gendered and ethnicised labour market of the Akkar region, social order is guaranteed, and local power structures are not challenged. The way in which these dynamics maintain or produce structures and processes of social

injustice is addressed differently by NGOs, but livelihoods increasingly fall into the ‘humanitarian protection’ sector, which should, conceptually, imply a rights-based framework.⁴⁹

The Socio-Economic Impact of Humanitarian Presence

I will now examine the socio-economic impact of the presence of humanitarian agencies on Halba’s labour market. The continual contribution of humanitarian actors to an everyday economy is rarely explored, despite the resources invested in analysis, development, and reform of humanitarian programmes and methodologies.

Humanitarian agencies first arrived in Akkar between 2011 and 2012, to assist Syrian refugees. On the whole, the regional class divide over the last five years has increased, as owners of cars, service provision and rental agencies, properties, and large shops became wealthier thanks to the financial input of INGOs and UN agencies responding to an increased international demand to conduct their programmes *in loco*. The wealthier classes have become wealthier as a consequence of the Syrian refugee crisis – which lowered the cost of the available workforce – and of the new market demand created by the humanitarian presence. Humanitarian aid provision, therefore, represented an opportunity to develop the northern border regions of Lebanon, where segments of the local population did not even typically hold citizenship before the 1990s.⁵⁰ Quite significantly, the wealthier among the interviewed local residents explained that, in the capacity of consumers, they had to travel ‘from one shop to the other. You cannot find anything you need in a specific city or village of Akkar’.⁵¹ Local residents also perceived that local competition had lately increased due to the job opportunities offered by INGOs, such as teaching and training in the humanitarian livelihood programmes, which are well-paid activities.

Therefore the ‘have-nots’ – the so-called hidden losers of the crisis⁵² – found themselves in competition with poor newcomers. While some of the middle and upper social strata of the Syrian refugee diaspora managed to reach the European coasts or other third countries, the most vulnerable among the refugees had no choice but to remain in Lebanon, having insufficient resources to pay for a smuggler, and being unable to provide skilled labour to qualify for sporadic humanitarian corridors to Italy and France.⁵³ Most of the economic pressure following the arrival of Syrian refugees has therefore affected poorer classes. The major pressure was perceived in the agricultural sector, in which Syrian nationals are legally – and historically – allowed to work. Moreover, the 2015 closure of the border has impoverished many Akkar’s villages that used to depend on smuggling.

Nevertheless, the World Food Programme-issued smart cards have not only sustained the everyday consumption of refugees since the beginning of the crisis, but have also supported Akkar's larger shops. Small businesses, according to local inhabitants, have however been ignored by INGOs, and consequently lost out on revenue over the last five years. Indeed, the vouchers, which are only redeemable at local businesses – and from 2013, the e-cards⁵⁴ – replaced direct food aid in ways that created aligned interests between refugees and powerful local elites, in accordance with Akkar's hierarchical social *habitus*⁵⁵ and the local architecture of labour. At the same time, local consumption of non-basic goods has barely increased. This has meant population growth with no increase in job opportunities. 'At the beginning of the refugee influx, many people opened new shops, especially restaurants and the like, but they eventually shut down as the rent is very expensive and customers are not many', a local resident explained.⁵⁶

On the whole, Akkar is a historically 'oppressed and forgotten area' (locally referred to as *mantaqa mazlume w mahrume*), but the socio-economic impact of the Syrian refugee influx varies according to a diverse local ability to capture potential benefits. However, the daily narrative of generalised deprivation has the effect of homogenising local vulnerabilities and wealth. Across social classes, Akkar's inhabitants generally describe their region as resourceless, and suggest that the railways should be rehabilitated to attract tourism, and that the local Rene' Moua'wad airport, now exclusively in use for military purposes, should be reopened, as it would provide 2,500 job opportunities.⁵⁷ Some aid workers pointed out that Akkar is underdeveloped for political reasons, rather than simply due to the refugee influx, as 'the Beqaa Valley hosts many more refugees and, in some of its areas, is even more developed than Akkar.'⁵⁸

Aid workers also mentioned the lack of local coordination as among the contributors to chronic poverty. Coordination between the international humanitarian apparatus and local authorities is said to exist only on paper,⁵⁹ with the representatives of the latter stating that INGOs rarely look for their approval before starting projects in the Akkar region. The traditional informality and flexibility of Lebanese governance have in fact long left generous room for independent humanitarian action. While humanitarian actors insist they never operate without local approval, the Halba Municipality expressed the feeling of being bypassed.⁶⁰ The leader of Akkar's Traders' Association⁶¹ also affirmed that his organisation would be able to provide material for livelihood programmes, such as tools necessary to produce artefacts and hand-made apparel, but there is no local collaboration either, and the will to survive with international funding overshadows such efforts.

Most of the NGOs that operate across Akkar are located in Halba and nearby villages al-Qobaiyat, and Wadi Khaled, but the economic benefits of their physical presence seem to have scarcely impacted Halba's economy.

One foreign aid worker commented⁶² that, with no time to cook while working up to 10 hours a day, he consumed all of his daily meals outside, but to go to bars and cafeterias, and use gym facilities, he preferred to go to al-Qobaiyat, considered safer than Halba.⁶³ Similarly, a local aid worker affirmed:⁶⁴

Surely INGOs gave more jobs to me and local middle class youth. I was unemployed before starting this job... For me the refugee influx has nothing to do with the opening of a few new shops, as their purchasing power is very low. The temporary opening of new shops in Akkar is rather a symptom of middle and upper classes that managed to become wealthier, and few of them are based in Halba.

Halba is therefore described by local residents as a place *to be addressed* by urban-planning and humanitarian interventions for its needs, not *to be lived in*. In this sense, its urban civic life is denied, as the Akkari inhabitant ‘remains a peasant, and does not need much apparel or any other sort of urban consumption’.⁶⁵ Participation in the market is rural in nature, such as the sale of agricultural tools. According to Walid,⁶⁶ the lack of employment and the denial of the city as a market-place led shop owners and local service providers to reduce business hours. In fact, Halba primarily lacks market demand for non-basic consumer goods. Some of these shops ‘shut down after a short time’⁶⁷ due to the inhabitants’ ‘limited income and way of living’ (*m’aiysh mahdud*). As the leader of the Akkar Traders’ Association put it,⁶⁸ ‘When shops shut down the city dies’.

Most aid workers believed the livelihood programmes they were working for would be unable to change the local market in Akkar, but considered the programmes a mechanism for ‘deciding what they want to do with their new skills, not merely finding a job’⁶⁹, thereby contributing to refugee life decision-making. The aid workers involved in the chocolate-making workshop also stressed that chocolates are produced in too small quantities to be sold: ‘To start commercial activities and coordination more funding would have been needed’.⁷⁰ Aid workers also tended to identify the legal impossibility of refugees obtaining work permits, and the increased toughness of the government’s migration policies, as the greatest limitations affecting their livelihoods projects.

Syrian refugees highlighted the fact that training people on the same tasks can end up feeding local competition over the same jobs rather than creating new job opportunities. The following account of a local aid worker, which is representative of the views of all of the NGO workers I interviewed in Halba, responds to the refugees’ concern:

Self-reliance cannot be an objective in short-term programmes, which are just meant to alleviate immediate hardships. Although we now have more long-term projects, self-reliance is not achievable. The majority of our livelihood projects are aimed at self-employment, but they cannot have a big economic impact on each household. However, this suits the Lebanese context, where most of the businesses are informal and self-run. Social cohesion is still possible with these strategies, as small-size self-employment does not generate much competition.⁷¹

This belief in not engendering actual competition in the labour market unravels a conception of refugee livelihoods and self-reliance as a sustainable means to social stability. Local economy development agendas and humanitarian livelihood programmes are clearly interrelated with social stability and cohesion agendas. Livelihoods surely depend on the type of risks that people are faced with and their security conditions. But rather than self-reliance as a final objective, the current humanitarian politics of livelihoods in northern Lebanon sets social cohesion and stability as the very purpose of such programmes. With both national groups involved in settings like the chocolate-making workshop, it is common to see mutual support and reciprocal services between refugees and local residents. For instance, Zena⁷² is a Halba resident who assists Syrian refugee children with their homework in the afternoon hours to get extra money, while the children's families pay her a convenient monthly rent for the land where they built their tents. Likewise, Lebanese and Syrian families who cannot afford a private car resort to the practice of car sharing.

Within the relative limitations of a merely qualitative approach, my research has shown how the physical presence of humanitarian agencies in Akkar has impacted the local market of Halba to a greater extent than their livelihood programmes. Refugees tend to approach the latter as leisure or potential home-based and small-scale economic activity, able only to integrate the household's income. Most refugees, especially women, were in fact sceptical about the possibility of finding a stable job in Lebanon. Lebanese residents, with the benefit of citizenship, approach livelihood programmes as a way to enhance their own job opportunities. Indeed, in a construction apprenticeship programme, DRC registered⁷³ ten Lebanese and one Syrian. Under their large MADAD programme,⁷⁴ likewise, 70% are Lebanese and 30% are Syrians. The scarce impact of programming with respect to the sizeable impact of the physical presence of the humanitarian apparatus resulted in the refugees believing that livelihood programmes are primarily designed to support the development of Lebanon's 'hosting' areas, rather than the refugees themselves; local people, on the other hand, continued to believe that humanitarian agencies had rushed over to assist the refugees exclusively, while neglecting chronic local hardships.

Conclusion

I have provided an analysis of the following research findings:

- The humanitarian attempt to enhance the local economy does not adopt self-reliance and economic prosperity as primary objectives. Rather, enhancing citizen and refugee participation in local markets is a means to achieve social cohesion and avoid tensions. Thereby, the livelihood agenda is explicitly interrelated with the security and stability agenda of INGOs and UN agencies.⁷⁵
- I have observed a varying economic impact of the humanitarian presence and the forced migration flows on the local labour market. The opening of aid work job positions allowed the local educated youth to get employment, therefore strengthening local middle classes. In short, people who already owned properties, cars, and licenses materially benefited from humanitarian provision. Conversely, the working classes – mostly rural in Akkar – have instead been put under strain, having to compete over the same resources and jobs with the newcomers, who provide a cheaper workforce (i.e. mostly in the construction, gardening, agriculture, and cleaning sectors).
- Humanitarian livelihood programmes affect the local market of labour less than the physical presence of the humanitarian apparatus. The programmes, mostly started by humanitarian agencies with the purpose of creating job opportunities, have little impact on the local economy. Indeed, they mainly aim to produce small-scale forms of self-employment, which neither aim to challenge the local hierarchical structure of labour nor always provide basic resources with large outreach. There is therefore tangible impact of livelihood programmes only on refugees and vulnerable local residents who have easier – yet discontinuous – access to minimum resources.
- Refugees tend to experience livelihood programmes as leisure activities, whilst Lebanese poor people approach them as potential future jobs. This is due to the refugees' social awareness that there are legal constraints preventing them from working, and that the Akkari economy is structurally unable to provide opportunities to the entire Syrian workforce. As a result, refugees often approach livelihood programmes with a feeling of resignation.

- The NGOs' outreach is intentionally limited. Restricting outreach is an inevitable result of limited resources available, and of the need to create a limited number of job opportunities. Furthermore, even though the humanitarian programmes' outreach is deliberately limited, it still needs to be based on more accurate criteria, as most participants find out about the livelihood programmes thanks to neighbours or acquaintances, and, more rarely, through published material, street posters, or door-to-door strategies.

Firstly, this study has shown the layered relationships between urban labour markets and social cohesion. Social cohesion in Halba is a varying *habitus* of human relations, which, in some cases, is upheld or sought out at the expense of social, ethnic, and gender equality. Despite the agenda of preserving social order, the delayed encounter between humanitarian actors and local authorities – who are sometimes unwilling to host humanitarian programmes – has prevented the city from grasping the development opportunities that crises can present. The impact of the humanitarian presence on Halba's local economy is however palpable. In this framework, self-reliance and resilient livelihoods emerge as a politics of economic survival and social stability. While, at a local level, the focus is increasingly placed on social stability and coexistence, the humanitarian livelihood approach is called back to the 'minimum of humanitarian reason',⁷⁶ e.g. guaranteeing basic services and resources.

Crisis protractedness inevitably produced the *need* to attribute agency to the refugees. Consequently, humanitarian action in Halba is increasingly legitimised through the narrative of upholding and ensuring long-term social cohesion and stability, using a language of a resilient livelihoods agenda. Following a refugee-agency-centred humanitarian ethics, intended beneficiaries are called upon to participate in the maintenance of such local stability. The effort towards 'resilient livelihoods' and 'self-reliance', moreover, links humanitarian with development programming in a bid to ensure long-term support.

However, how can we insist upon the importance of making a transition from care to self-reliance and resilient livelihoods, when the legal and economic structure of the receiving society will not grant refugees the right to work, and when resettlement in a third country is unlikely? As this paper has tried to show, in the Akkar scenario, the newly acquired skills of longstanding refugees may at times turn into mere accessories; and addressing their aspirations through livelihood programmes ends up providing moral relief for the service providers rather than a self-fulfilment opportunity for the intended beneficiaries.

Finally, the early humanitarian efforts in Akkar had actively ethnicised the emergence of new and old needs, polarising the needs of the Lebanese and those of the Syrians. Today, compensatory stability mechanisms address social tensions through refugee economic survival and local empowerment. Therefore, while tensions are still identified in ethnically hybrid contexts, the humanitarian assistance regime is increasingly deployed according to area, rather than ethnicity or religion. In other words, a geographic rather than an ethnic and religious politics of vulnerability is finally emerging, but humanitarian security agendas still stymie this process by adopting ethnocentric regimes of stability.

APPENDIX

Note on Methodology

This study draws on in-depth interviews and participant observation with four local residents, namely two Lebanese women and two Lebanese men, who were participants in or unaddressed by livelihood programmes. Specifically, I conducted walking interviews with local residents, in an effort to connect their accounts to the spatiality of Halba's political economy and the past Syrian control over the region. Public spaces did in fact prompt personal memories. This was not feasible with the urban refugees, who, most of the time, felt uncomfortable or even unsafe in outdoor spaces. In-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted with five Syrian refugees, again of mixed gender and beneficiary status.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people officially considered to be 'city authorities', or referred to as figures of authority at a local level; among these, the mayor and deputy mayor, the governor of the district of Akkar (*mohafez*), the *makhatir* (central state officials), the director of the American University of Technology (Akkar branch), and the municipal library secretary.

Finally, in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted with six local aid workers from five INGOs, namely the UNICEF-Akkar Network for Development partnership, Save the Children Lebanon, the International Rescue Committee, and the Danish Refugee Council, all of which were implementing livelihood programmes in Halba. I have thereby sampled aid workers who were operators in livelihood programmes and everyday local market actors at the same time, in order to better assess the overall socio-economic impact of humanitarian actors on Halba.

I have also had access to local archives where Arabic texts on the history and economy of the city were collected, and drawn on the support of local intellectuals – specifically a historian, a writer, and a poet. It is worth highlighting that the one-month fieldwork assignment has not provided me with sufficient time to observe how residents experienced and responded to the temporary nature of such livelihood programmes. In fact, such programmes in Halba normally run for three months. In one month, I personally had the

chance to speak to people who had already completed a training or work mission, or who were doing it at the time of fieldwork. The timeline thus posed constraints on my assessment of what livelihoods programmes had changed in the individual's broader life framework, and what they had not.

Names of private individuals have been changed in the text, to protect identities and preserve anonymity, except for interviewees who have expressed their consent to be explicitly mentioned in this paper.

ENDNOTES

1. This study is dedicated to Badiy'a and the 'Akkar Network for Development' staff, Halba. I am greatly indebted to Dr Jonathan Darling (University of Manchester), who reviewed an earlier draft of this paper.
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3. Faraj Tawfiq Zakhour, *Halba fy nisf qarn 1900-1950* (Halba: Dar Zakhour li'l tab'a, an-nashr, wa at-tawzi', 2005), 24.
4. The Arabic transliteration in this paper follows the (uncoded) commonly accepted rules of the Lebanese dialect. I therefore transcribe terms and sentences in the way local speakers pronounce them, rather than adopting the Standard Arabic transcription scheme, which would less evoke lived experience.
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10. The following illustrates how changeable are Lebanese policies with respect to Syrian work in Lebanon: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/14/lebanon-new-refugee-policy-step-forward>.
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12. John Chalcraft, *Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon: The Limits of Transnational Integration, Communitarian Solidarity, and Popular Agency* (Florence: EUI Papers, RSCAS, 2006/26).
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15. Interview conducted on February 27, 2017.
16. Estella Carpi, *The Everyday Experience of Humanitarianism in Akkar's Villages* (Beirut: Civil Society Knowledge Centre and Lebanon Support, 2014).
17. Informal conversation between the author and a local resident. Halba, March 9, 2017.

18. Carolina Moulin, and Peter Nyers, “We Live in a Country of UNHCR” – Refugee Protests and Global Political Society’. *International Political Sociology* 1, (2007), 363.
19. Interview with local aid worker. Halba, March 1, 2017.
20. Halba, February 22, 2017.
21. Halba, March 1, 2017.
22. Halba, March 10, 2017.
23. Interview with a local aid worker. Halba, March 3, 2017.
24. Mark Duffield, ‘The Liberal Way of Development and the Development–Security Impasse: Exploring the Global Life–Chance Divide’, *Security Dialogue* 41 (1), (2010): 53–76.
25. Interview with a local aid worker. Halba, February 22, 2017.
26. Interview with a Danish Refugee Council aid worker. Halba, March 10, 2017. Interview with an International Rescue Committee aid worker. Halba, February 22, 2017.
27. Interview with a local aid worker. Halba, February 18, 2017.
28. *UK Aid Funded Projects in Underprivileged Akkar*, UK government website, published on December 16, 2016.
29. Informal conversation with local residents. Halba, March 2017. Interview with the governor. Halba, March 8, 2017.
30. Interview with the leader of the Akkar Traders’ Association Mr Ibrahim Dahr. Halba, March 7, 2017.
31. Interview with UNDP. Tripoli, February 22, 2017.
32. Interview with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor. Halba, February 23, 2017.
33. Lama Mourad, ‘From Conflict-Insensitive to Conflict-Driven Aid: Responding to the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon’, Middle East Institute, 2016, accessed 8 June, 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/conflict-insensitive-conflict-driven-aid>.
34. Ibid.
35. Estella Carpi, *The Everyday Experience of Humanitarianism in Akkar’s Villages* (Beirut: Civil Society Knowledge Centre and Lebanon Support, 2014).
36. The Arabic linguistic genealogy of the conception of ‘livelihoods’ reveals how broader the scope of humanitarian action has become, enlarging the meaning from *masdar rizq/maurid rizq* (‘source of sustenance/living’) to a more general *tahsin sobol al-‘ayish*, ‘betterment of ways of living’.
37. Interview with Rawan, a Syrian refugee woman. Halba, March 7, 2017.
38. UNDP affirmed it had set up a laboratory of chocolate making in Akkar, but no local resident or aid worker was aware of this or of where exactly the place was. Halba, February 28, 2017.
39. “Sweet Success: How the Haddads went from Refugees to Employers in 1 Year”, *CBC News*, Jan 7, 2017.
40. Interview with Lawlat. Halba, February 28, 2017.
41. Interview with Syrian refugee women. Halba, February 21, 2017.
42. Oren Yiftachel, and Haim Yakobi, ‘Control, Resistance, and Informality: Urban Ethnocracy in Beer-Sheva, Israel’, in Nezar al-Sayyad and Ananya Roy (eds.) *Urban Informality: Transnational perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America and South Asia* (Boulder, CO: Lexington Books, 2003), 111–133.
43. Halba, March 9, 2017.
44. Halba, March 8, 2017.
45. Sarah Bailey and Paul Harvey, *State of Evidence on Humanitarian Cash Transfers* (London: ODI, 2015).

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52. Robert Chambers, 'Hidden Losers? The Impact of Rural Refugees and Refugee Programmes on Poorer Hosts', *International Migration Review* 20, (1986), 245-263.
53. <http://www.mediterraneanhope.com/articoli/italy-opens-humanitarian-corridors-for-refugees-867> and <http://www.onuitalia.com/2017/03/14/humanitarian-corridors-france-joins-italy-hollande-giro-step-forward-globalization-indifference/>.
54. 'New E-Cards Make Life Easier to Syrian Refugees in Lebanon', *World Food Programme*, October 13, 2013.
55. Pierre Bourdieu defines 'habitus' as a system of embodied dispositions and tendencies that organise the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it.
56. Halba, February 28, 2017.
57. Interview with Ibrahim Dahr, Leader of the Akkar Traders Association. Halba, March 7, 2017.
58. Halba, February 22, 2017.
59. Marwa Boustani et al., *Responding to the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon. Collaboration between Aid Agencies and Local Governance Structures* (London: IIED, 2016).
60. Halba, February 23, 2017.
61. Interview with Ibrahim Dahr, Leader of the Akkar Traders Association. Halba, March 7, 2017.
62. Halba, March 6, 2017.
63. This is due to its healthier population, which is entirely Christian Maronite, and therefore believed to be less sympathetic and associable with the Islamic armed groups in Syria.
64. Halba, February 28, 2017.
65. Informal conversation with local residents. Halba, February 25, 2017.
66. Halba, February 23, 2017.
67. Halba, February 28, 2017.
68. Interview with Ibrahim Dahr. Halba, March 7, 2017.
69. Interview with a local aid worker. Halba, March 10, 2017.
70. Halba, February 26, 2017.
71. Interview with a local aid worker. Halba, March 10, 2017.
72. Halba, February 27, 2017.
73. Interview with local aid worker. Halba, March 10, 2017.
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