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Towards a Relational Understanding of Vulnerability: The Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon Through a Feminist Lens

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Abstract: Recent debates on vulnerability have considered how to best define and measure it in order to account for the various factors that shape people's susceptibility to harm. This article reads humanitarian and development notions of vulnerability against the relational and interdependent view put forward by feminist scholars. Such a conceptual interrogation, which examines the broader assumptions underpinning aid programming, is especially relevant as vulnerability has become a key metric for eligibility for support in a range of global contexts. Examining two approaches used for assessing and alleviating vulnerability deployed in the response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, we show that the tools utilized by aid programmes reflect particular views of how vulnerability operates. In examining those conceptualizations through the lens of recent development and feminist thinking on vulnerability, we foreground the interdependence of different groups, the generative nature of this interdependency, as well as the interlocked nature of scales involved in producing (and alleviating) vulnerability. Adopting such a relational and dynamic view of vulnerability, we argue, can open possibilities for more inclusive and transformational development approaches.

Key Words: Displacement, Lebanon, Refugees, Syria, Vulnerability, Humanitarianism

I. Introduction

The arrival of 1.5 million Syrian refugees to Lebanon since 2011 has been blamed for stretching the country's resources and ability to provide for residents, although it has also resulted in a large inflow of international aid. As in the wider humanitarian and development field, the notion of 'vulnerability' has become central to programming and the distribution of funds. This article examines how the international response to the displacement crisis from Syria, developed in coordination with the Lebanese government, has conceptualized the vulnerability of both refugees and host populations and how this, in turn, has shaped aid programming. The article reads these operational notions of vulnerability against recent development scholarship, which understands vulnerability as socially produced, multi-factoral and multi-scalar, as well as feminist theorizations of the term, which describe it as a universal condition grounded in people's reliance on human and non-human support systems. This allows us to critically interrogate

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how international actors operating in Lebanon have employed the term.

This reading reveals that in the international aid response in Lebanon, vulnerability is viewed as something to be attenuated by providing resources to re-establish independence from others. At the same time, locating vulnerability as a characteristic of some depoliticizes the origins of its uneven distribution and thus avoids addressing those causes. It also fails to recognize the potential advantages of interdependency with others, and thus the potential contributions of those deemed vulnerable. Paying attention to the interconnected nature of vulnerability allows us to see how these approaches, despite attempts to precisely locate vulnerability through sophisticated tools, in fact have effects at a range of different scales. This leads us to question whether it is always the vulnerability of those 'targeted' that is the aim of such programmes. Thus, we do not argue for more precise definitions or targeting mechanisms but rather show that a transformative approach to development requires a conceptual opening. The article closes by suggesting how an understanding of vulnerability informed by feminist theory may help us move towards more inclusive and transformational approaches to vulnerability in development scholarship and practice.

Vulnerability has become a key tenet of development discourse as well as social policy and political theory. In providing a brief overview of the literature from development studies and feminist vulnerability studies, we outline how the term has evolved as its usage has risen exponentially in both operational contexts and theoretical discussions around social justice. The article takes the fact that different arenas employ different, at times opposing, approaches to vulnerability as its starting point.

The way the term has been deployed in different sub-fields of development studies has long been incongruent. Often, literature on vulnerability has taken a human-focussed approach, where it is linked to economic questions of livelihoods and poverty (e.g. Al-Mamun et al., 2014; Briguglio et al., 2009). In this sub-field, Adger (2006: 739) defines vulnerability as the (in)ability to 'withstand shocks and stresses' to livelihood. Other frameworks focus primarily on the hazards emanating from the environment such as climate change or natural disaster (e.g. Birkmann, 2006). In this context, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction has defined vulnerability as 'the set of conditions and processes resulting from physical, social, economic, and environmental factors, which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards' (ISDR, 2004: 16). Scholars note that the term is often defined by 'vagueness and malleability' (Brown et al., 2017) and 'seems to defy consensus usage'—not only because of disciplinary differences but due to deeper conceptual misalignment (Few, 2003: 48).

However, in recent years, when focusing on vulnerability to 'natural' disasters, scholars have come to agree that human and environmental factors must be thought together to gain an integrated picture of the differential distribution of vulnerability to various risks (Lin and Chang, 2013). It is now firmly established that such vulnerability is shaped 'as much by social factors as it is by the nature of physical hazards' (Few et al., 2021: 9). As uneven risk to environmental hazards is socially 'produced' (Collins, 2009; see also Gaillard, 2010; Okpara, 2015; Pelling, 1999), 'vulnerability is inherently socially differentiated' (Few et al., 2021: 9). Here, intersectionality has been proposed as a useful lens for understanding differential vulnerability to disasters (Jean et al., 2023). Furthermore, vulnerability is now understood as embedded in a complex system of interdependent factors operating across a range of scales. Haque (2020) argues that the dynamic and complex array of levels, actors and factors influencing vulnerability must be viewed from a 'whole systems' approach encompassing all interacting elements. Broad and Cavanaugh (2011) propose a model integrating environmental, economic and social aspects for

understanding human risk exposure which focuses on the relational and interdependent nature of the different components. They show that 'human-created vulnerabilities are not just economic, but often threaten human and planetary well-being' (Broad and Cavanaugh, 2011: 1132). Naudé et al. (2009) also highlight the 'multidimensional and dynamic' nature of vulnerability. They pay particular attention to its scales, proposing vulnerability should be measured at a range of levels (from micro to macro, individual to global). Yet despite growing awareness of anthropogenic change, such multi-directional relationalities and scalar effects have not been joined up sufficiently in the literature.

In development practice, despite this conceptual advancement, vulnerability is still often understood in economic terms (Chambers, 1989; Verme et al., 2016). Focusing on social protection issues, several authors note the term's increased usage in the humanitarian field, particularly with regard to refugees, in recent years (Hruschka and Leboeuf, 2019; Sözer, 2019, 2020; Turner, 2019, 2021). Concurrently, they express concern that the elevation of vulnerability as a humanitarian concept is associated with neoliberal resource restrictions. This shift employs the language of vulnerability to delineate increasingly narrow sub-groups within populations in need, many of whom therefore are excluded from support.

Alongside its ascent as an operational tool for determining eligibility for aid, vulnerability has become a central concept in scholarly debates on social inequality, structural violence and the ethics of care, particularly from feminist perspectives (see Koivunen et al., 2018 for an overview). A group of theorists labelled 'vulnerability scholars' by Cole (2016) views vulnerability as ontological, a shared human condition, as well as relational (Fineman, 2008, Gilson, 2014, Mackenzie et al., 2014). Arguing against a bounded notion of subjecthood, authors like Butler (2009: 33) highlight that humans are always reliant on, and therefore vulnerable to, beings and things beyond themselves.

In addition to the threat of potential harm, this interdependency is also viewed as having 'generative' potential (Cole, 2016). From this universal view of vulnerability, several ethical principles follow: Fineman (2008: 2) writes from a legal perspective that 'the "vulnerable subject" must replace the autonomous and independent subject asserted in the liberal tradition', while Turner (2006: 25) argues for 'embodiment as a foundation for defending universal human rights'. Mackenzie et al. (2014) seek to develop 'an ethics of vulnerability' with implications for moral and political theory as well as social policy; Hutchings (2013) focuses on the impact such a reading has on ethics in international relations. Butler et al. (2016) argue that vulnerability is also a radical openness that allows for agency and can even be drawn upon for resistance. Overall, this debate in feminist scholarship has largely sought to redefine vulnerability, reframing it from a state of victimhood and passivity to one of potential agency and mutual care. Cole (2016) refers to this positive framing as 'vulnerability-as-interconnectivity'.[1]

Given the omnipresence of vulnerability in both development and social theory contexts, as well as its differing definitions, it is worth examining the conceptual underpinnings of the term. While development literature uses vulnerability in a normative manner as a condition to be overcome, critical and philosophical investigations of vulnerability view it not merely as a deficiency but also as a receptiveness to others that can be positive. Although a notion of vulnerability as a quality to be embraced may seem antithetical to the development field's approach, the feminist view has begun to influence thinking of development scholars. Thus, Jakimow (2021: 629) proposes vulnerability as an 'ethical practice' to transform 'unequal relations in development'. Through attentiveness to their own privilege and opening themselves up to discomfort, elite development practitioners can, according to

her, avoid reproducing structurally unequal power relations. Beginning from this tension and challenge to development studies, this article examines the way ever more complex and nuanced definitions of vulnerability are operationalized 'in the field'—specifically, the Lebanese context of mass displacement from Syria. The article asks how vulnerability conceptions and assessment tools shape responses, and what we can learn from juxtaposing current humanitarian/development practices and these recent scholarly debates on vulnerability.

To do so, the article focuses on two case studies of internationally funded vulnerability programming in Lebanon, a paradigmatic case of overlapping crises and vulnerabilities. Lebanon has hosted several large waves of forced displacement over the past century, including Armenians, Kurds, Palestinians, Iraqis and, most recently, Syrians, in addition to numerous waves of internal displacement. Today, one quarter of its population are refugees, the highest proportion of any country in the world (UNHCR, 2022). Even prior to the economic crisis engulfing the country since 2019, one of the most severe worldwide in recent history (World Bank, 2021), and the Beirut port blast in August 2020, the quality of Lebanon's infrastructure was ranked among the lowest in the world (Harake and Kostopoulos, 2018). Having never properly been rebuilt after the civil war, public services have been insufficient across sectors and geographic areas and bound up in ongoing sectarian politics (see Baumann and Kanafani, 2020). Especially with the Syrian refugee crisis since 2011, Lebanon has seen an inflow of international funds to support its refugee response. Much of this response has taken the form of cash transfers, a growing trend in humanitarian responses (Garcia and Moore, 2012; Heaslip et al., 2016; Leisering, 2018).

As Brun et al. (2021) note, there are two parallel systems of aid in Lebanon—humanitarian relief for refugees and development aid for citizens. The following, empirical part of the article examines two of the most significant tools and programmes in recent years seeking to address vulnerability in different sectors of the international response to the Syria crisis in Lebanon. The first is a humanitarian targeting formula used to determine eligibility for aid, aiming to alleviate vulnerability on the level of refugee households as part of one of UNHCR's largest cash transfer programmes. The second is UNDP's flagship development programme, which aims to reduce intra- and inter-communal tensions in municipalities deemed vulnerable through infrastructure projects. The article is based on an in-depth review of the documentation and grey literature relating to these two programmes. These include the project documents, information materials, funder and external evaluation reports, as well as internal presentations and planning documents made available to the authors. The article further draws on interviews with 38 individuals from UN agencies as well as international and local NGOs working on the Syrian refugee crisis response in Lebanon. These served to contextualize the case studies among the range of methodologies used by different actors in vulnerability assessment and to obtain an overview of the range of professional viewpoints on various vulnerability assessment methods. Interviews, in addition to site visits and participant observation among a range of UN, INGO and local NGO actors took place between mid-2018 and mid-2019.

The discussion examines the assumptions underpinning these two programmes and reads them against recent scholarly debates on vulnerability. We argue that the first, humanitarian programme deploys what we call a 'bounded' approach: In failing to acknowledge the shared nature of vulnerability, it avoids addressing the structural conditions that created vulnerability. The development programme recognizes the interdependence between different groups and seeks more systematic transformation, yet understands the relationship of vulnerability in a uni-directional manner. A feminist lens

draws our attention to the positive aspects of openness to others and thus the lack of opportunities for those deemed vulnerable to become active participants in shaping the conditions that affect them. When accounting for the complex dimensions and interdependencies within which vulnerability operates, we see that these programmes address exposures to harm beyond those groups initially targeted, highlighting the scalar and political reverberations of such interventions. In concluding, we propose ways in which feminist and critical development perspectives might be incorporated into vulnerability assessments and interventions for a more inclusive and transformative development practice.

II. Vulnerability Assessments and Programming in Lebanon

The international response to the influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon has been significant and focuses on both displaced and host populations. To coordinate the activities of a wide range of actors, a number of vulnerability assessment tools have been developed at various scales. This section introduces the most significant tools before examining in depth two programmes operating at the household and community level, respectively.

The estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees[2] in Lebanon make up the highest number per capita, and per square kilometre, worldwide. Since 2015, over US $8 billion of international funding has gone to Lebanon under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP—Government of Lebanon and UN, 2022). Notably, half of the overall humanitarian response is directed at Lebanese citizens, with the LCRP also targeting 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese (LCRP—Government of Lebanon and UN, 2022). In 2021, the country received US $617 million for programming related to refugees and US $569 million for work supporting national institutions and host communities (3RP, 2022). Due to the government's 'no-camp' policy aiming to avoid the permanent settlement of refugees, the majority live dispersed in urban areas or in informal tented settlements, rather than in formally managed refugee camps (Fakhoury, 2017; Sanyal, 2017). More than ten years into the crisis in Syria, the vast majority of refugees, 9 out of 10, live in extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2022). Affecting both refugees and hosts, food prices increased six-fold between 2019 and 2022, while at the same time unemployment has risen immensely, with 20% of workers losing their jobs (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2022).

In an ongoing economic and infrastructural crisis, refugees are frequently blamed for overstretched services, despite the fact that Lebanon's predicament of public services long precedes the arrival of Syrian refugees (Baumann and Kanafani, 2020) and although the Syrian crisis has brought a large amount of international funding into the country (Brun et al., 2021). This view in which refugees are presented as a 'burden' or 'pressure' on the host country's infrastructures and thus blamed for long-term residents' hardships is perpetuated by government (Government of Lebanon, 2018) and media discourses (Abid et al., 2017; Baylouni, 2020; Hussein et al., 2020; Knudsen, 2017). The perception that refugees are a strain on the country has increasingly led to intercommunal tensions (ARK, 2021).

As vulnerability is experienced at different spatial levels (cf. Naudé et al., 2009), it is also assessed at a range of scales in Lebanon. During an individual displaced person's refugee status determination, or when evaluating eligibility for resettlement or other forms of assistance, agencies employ a list of 'vulnerability criteria' (cf. Janmyr and Mourad, 2018). These are categories of people with specific characteristics: unaccompanied minors, female heads of household, the elderly, disabled or chronically ill—global standards which are at times adapted to local conditions.[3]

At the household level, the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR), an annual representative survey of approximately 5,000 Syrian refugee households, informs the planning of local government, donor and NGO

responses and refines targeting of assistance (UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP, 2022: 17). While it does not offer a precise definition of 'vulnerability', it builds up a detailed picture across different sectors, including economic (income, food security, basic assistance), physical and environmental (shelter, living conditions), and social (access to services, protection). It also tracks some correlations between these factors, for instance, the proportion of female-headed households living in certain types of shelters, and thus engages with vulnerability as a multi-dimensional and dynamic quality.

In addition to these tools, different sectors have their own definitions of vulnerability. There have been, however, significant efforts to align these definitions across the humanitarian and development sectors and even initiatives to create a unified definition across sectors.[4] In the following, we examine the assumptions underpinning two vulnerability programmes in more detail.

The 'Desk Formula' for Cash Transfers

Cash assistance makes up forty percent of the international response to the refugee crisis in Lebanon.[5] In part due to its well-developed banking sector, Lebanon has been 'at the forefront worldwide' of the trend towards such payments, with an average of US $400 million delivered annually in this manner.[6] The Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance Program in Lebanon constitutes one of the largest UNHCR cash programmes globally (UNHCR, 2021b). From 2017 onwards, close to 700,000 individuals annually received cash through the World Food Programme's cash-for-food programme, which provides US $27 per person per month. Of these recipients, a sub-set of several ten thousand 'most vulnerable' households receive multipurpose cash, with monthly payments of approximately US $175 per family, from either WFP or UNHCR (Chaaban et al., 2020; UNHCR, 2021a).[7]

Eligibility for both types of cash payment, which are delivered through the same electronic debit card, is determined through the so-called Desk Formula, a means of determining vulnerability, and thus eligibility, without in-person assessments (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2017: 38). This formula has been recalibrated annually since 2016 with the help of expert consultants to account for demographic changes and refine the methodology. In simple terms, the formula correlates demographic factors[8] from UNHCR's Registration Database to the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP, 2022) to arrive at a predicted expenditure and thus create a ranking of socio-economic vulnerability. In 2019, a predicted expenditure below US $87 per person meant a household was deemed 'severely vulnerable'. The system is overall a 'money-metric' way of measuring vulnerability and thus, according to one INGO representative working closely with the formula, 'probably not the most holistic way to measure it'.[9] However, from its 2018 version onward, the Desk Formula was deemed to be 'better at capturing non-economic vulnerability' than previous iterations.[10] The aim of the programme is to decrease negative coping mechanisms and thus affect vulnerabilities in the arenas of education, health, employment and gender equality in addition to alleviating financial pressures (Chaaban et al., 2020). While the measure for vulnerability is econometric and the interventions are cash-based, then, the Desk Formula seeks to capture as well as address more than merely economic forms of vulnerability.

By applying a '"bottom up" approach that targets its assistance to those with the lowest score' (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2022: 75), the Desk Formula prioritizes the 'most vulnerable' beneficiaries from among an already vulnerable population. In 2019, more than half of all Syrian refugee households fell into the 'severely vulnerable' category; by 2021, this figure was 88% (UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP, 2022: 11). However, since funding is

limited, not all those who are eligible receive cash, only the lowest ranking households receive assistance.[11] The formula ranks households up to the eighth decimal point of predicted expenditure, meaning a household with predicted per person expenditure of US $22.00000071 may receive assistance while one ranked at the hypothetical expenditure of US $22.00000072 may not. A UNHCR official working on the Desk Formula conceded:

> Of course, if you visit a family ranked at 22 or 87 Dollars, it will be really difficult to tell the difference, but operationally speaking, you can justify it [excluding one family and including the other] because it's an output of something scientific.[12]

The first part of this statement aligns with a number of reports on a 'widespread perception' among the refugee population that not everyone in need received multi-purpose cash (Samuels et al., 2020: 5). The second part of the quotation suggests that the technical sophistication of the tool imparts credibility and impartiality to a targeting process that may be perceived as arbitrary. This becomes especially apparent during the annual 'recalibration' of the Desk Formula based on new VASYR survey results and refined methodologies, which re-draws the cut-off line for the most severe vulnerability-as-eligibility for cash aid. Many beneficiaries who are excluded from one year to the next do not understand why their assistance has been discontinued, especially when their conditions have not changed and no new data about their individual living situation was collected. They thus express their frustration with what they perceive as the arbitrary nature of aid allocations (Bastagli et al., 2020; Ullrich, 2018). As one UN representative put it, agencies are 'forever adjusting' who receives assistance, causing 'confusion and anger'.[13]

The mathematical complexity of the predictive model, which is based on Proxy Means Testing and uses machine learning, is also infamous among aid workers, many of whom said they did not sufficiently understand its methodology, speculated about the way it functioned, were unable to judge the accuracy of its targeting, and struggled to justify its outcomes to their beneficiaries.[14] The logic underpinning inclusion decisions for this vulnerability programme is not only technically sophisticated but also purposefully opaque. UNHCR's communication guidelines on explaining the decisions to discontinue cash aid, according to a representative of the programme, focus on delivering 'simple messages' without 'telling much.'[15] According to the same person, the agencies seek to 'economise information because it takes beneficiaries one cycle of assistance to start tricking eligibility'. The complexity and technical sophistication of the formula thus allow agencies to legitimize difficult eligibility decisions, but they also serve to keep refugees at a distance from those decision-making processes.

The Lebanon Host Community Support Programme

At the community level, a range of programmes seek to address vulnerability by increasing the services available, as well as offering employment opportunities with a view to lowering social tensions between refugees and hosts (Inter-Agency Coordination Team, 2021). UNDP's 'flagship programme' (UNDP, 2017: 11) in this regard is the Lebanese Host Community Support Programme (LHSP), which implemented projects in 240 municipalities and reached 5.6 million beneficiaries, a third of them displaced Syrians, between 2014 and 2023 (UNDP, 2023). In this period, the programme had a budget of more than US $200 million, the largest portion of which came from UK development aid (van de Velde et al., 2023).

Part of the wider Lebanon Stabilization and Recovery Programme, the LHSP aims to reduce competition for basic services in vulnerable communities, generate income for vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees, and increase employment opportunities,

particularly for vulnerable groups (UNDP, n.d.). The definition of 'vulnerable communities' used is based on the notion that a high presence of refugees leads to competition over resources. Initially, the locations for the programme were based on the map of the 251 'most vulnerable' communities of Lebanon, one of the main tools used for aid programming (Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, 2015). The map displays access to health and education services, water and sanitation, income and housing conditions, as well as the ratio of refugees to Lebanese citizens. The latter highlights the 'population pressure on services and resources', with more refugees than Lebanese in a given location considered to exert 'high pressure' (Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, 2015).

In these 'most vulnerable' locations, a participatory methodology was deployed to map risks and resources, bringing together mayors and local stakeholders to create new platforms for joint decision-making.[16] Refined over the years, these participatory processes were led by municipalities and the Ministry of Social Affairs and involved civil society in articulating the needs of communities, the roots of tension and the production of action plans. Furthermore, social tension monitoring sought to identify locations most in need of alleviating stressors through improved public services and increased employment opportunities (DFID, 2021). Tensions are assessed by monitoring news and social media, as well as surveying mayors' and local residents' perceptions on intercommunal relations.[17] In addition, however, donors' priorities 'also play a significant role' in identifying locations for intervention, according to one evaluation of the programme (van de Velde et al., 2023: 60).

The LHSP's theory of change assumes that vulnerability is based on competition over limited resources, and that it is urgent to reduce tension and conflict in areas where there is a high proportion of refugees:

> If better quality and better targeted services are provided by municipalities to poor communities hosting high concentrations of Syrian refugees. Then host community confidence in the government's ability and willingness to meet their service delivery needs will increase. Thereby reducing tensions between communities and Syrian refugees. (Aktis, 2018: 7)

There are a number of inter-linked vulnerabilities that this programme addresses, then: that of hosts who experience or fear a reduction in public services and employment opportunities, that of Syrian refugees who may become victims of violent responses because of this atmosphere of competition, but also that of the Lebanese government, which is viewed as unable to meet public needs.

With regard to the latter, strengthening municipalities to deliver services is a key aspect of the programme. A mid-term evaluation of the LHSP examined the links between residents' trust in local and state institutions and basic service delivery. One of its key findings is that, following the programme, 'municipalities are increasingly viewed as both trusted to take the right action and able to do so' (Aktis, 2016: 6). Further, the report finds 'improving awareness and communication around service delivery is key to changing people's perceptions about the legitimacy of the municipality' (Aktis, 2016: 9). A later evaluation (Aktis, 2018) notes as 'positive' that municipalities were seen as responsible for development projects and lamented when credit was given to international NGOs (Aktis, 2018: 19, 35). Similarly focusing on the perception of municipal authorities' legitimacy, another evaluation states: 'The LHSP methodology has resulted, in fact, in the improvement of the image of municipalities in the community' (KDC, 2018: 19). This focus on altering perceptions of local authorities' legitimacy in residents' eyes is notable given that it is not an explicit aim of the programme.

III. Discussion

At first glance, the two programmes and their respective approaches to assessing and

addressing vulnerability can be roughly mapped onto two different views of vulnerability. The cash programme, a humanitarian intervention targeting individual households through limited financial support, reflects a 'bounded view' of vulnerability, an understanding that is shaped by the liberal notion of the autonomous and self-sufficient subject. We show how this individualizing approach does not necessarily re-establish autonomy and fails to address underlying causes of vulnerability. The LHSP, on the other hand, is a development programme which takes a community-based approach grounded in an understanding of interdependent vulnerabilities. As such, it reflects something more closely approaching a feminist view of vulnerability. However, its unidirectional theory of change does not account for the contributions that refugees can make, viewing them only as drains on resources and potential victims of violence. Both programmes' approaches impact vulnerability on scales other than those targeted, which shore up the political status quo rather than transform the conditions that caused vulnerability to begin with. We suggest that a focus on the relational, multi-dimensional, multi-scalar, as well as generative nature of vulnerability can contribute to more inclusive and transformative development policies.

Bounded Views of Vulnerability Side-Stepping Causes

A 'bounded' understanding of vulnerability, as a quality located in particular individuals or certain groups, is diametrically opposed to the ontological perspective on vulnerability, which sees it as a universal condition, or a relational process (Gilson, 2018). We have seen that the Desk Formula is a sophisticated targeting mechanism that singles out those most eligible for aid from a group that is overwhelmingly living in poverty and in need of social protection. The feminist focus on vulnerable embodiment grounded in interdependency has been articulated as a critique of the liberal 'myth' of autonomy: the notion of the 'self-sufficient, independent, rational' subject (Mackenzie, 2014: 34 referencing Fineman, 2008; see also Anderson, 2003; Hutchings, 2013; Shildrick, 2002). Such an approach views vulnerability as an aberration from the norm, an insufficiency of the individual, and seeks to overcome vulnerability by re-establishing autonomy and a state of natural wholeness.

This (neo)liberal approach to vulnerability is reflected in the multipurpose cash programme's emphasis on targeting specific households and on individual choice. The cash aid disbursed via the Desk Formula supports recipients' ability to purchase goods and access services 'based on their own prioritization and in a *dignified* manner' (UNHCR, 2021a, emphasis in original). The aim is to enhance households' financial coping capacities, but how they spend the funds, and whether this serves to address the particular vulnerabilities they are facing, is a more complicated matter. Evaluations found that, overall, the cash transfers had a positive effect on access to education and safe employment (Chaaban et al., 2020), early marriage and household violence (Bastagli et al., 2020), but mixed effects on intra- and inter-group relations (Samuels et al., 2020) and healthcare (Lyles et al., 2021). However, even the positive impacts did not last long, as 'households return to their pre-assistance situation' after four to ten months (Chaaban et al., 2020). That cash payments did not have a lasting effect on recipients' situation led UNHCR representatives to question how they defined and measured vulnerability more generally.[18]

The singling out of particular households from a wider population that is generally vulnerable can cause more vulnerability on the community scale, as the tensions arising from intransparent inclusion criteria and recalibrations of the formula (Bastagli et al., 2020, Samuels et al., 2020) show. Cash transfers also form part of a wider trend of remote humanitarianism, where Global South settings are used as laboratories for high-tech surveillance and biometric data collection (Jacobsen,

2015; Madianou, 2019). In Lebanon, iris scans are used to identify cash transfer recipients (UNHCR, 2018), who have limited ability to freely consent to this process as they are highly dependent on support. Despite a focus on self-determination, there is, then, a lack of transparency and accountability in these techno-managerial advancements, the privacy risks of which are borne by aid recipients.

One reason why approaches like that of the cash aid programme may not have long-lasting effects in alleviating vulnerability may be that they fail to address root causes. 'Bounded' understandings of vulnerability mark certain individuals as 'vulnerable' and thus the locus of the problem and of the intervention. If assessments do not account for the relational nature of vulnerability and instead focus on continually refining the targeting of individuals labelled 'vulnerable', this can obfuscate the actors and systems that 'made these individuals vulnerable in the first place' (Jean et al., 2023: 11, see also Clark, 2013; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017).

At an inter-sectoral meeting attended by UN, NGO and Lebanese government representatives to discuss the definitions of vulnerability under LCRP programming, an INGO representative from the protection sector invoked the social model of disability, which rejects a view of disability as an inherent deficiency in people, and instead locates the challenges disabled people face in societies and environments unresponsive to their needs (cf. Shakespeare, 2010). Similarly, according to this representative, addressing vulnerabilities always requires rights-based responses that address the social causes of exclusion.[19] Another aid worker developing a separate vulnerability assessment for an INGO argued that the Desk Formula depoliticized the causes of refugees' vulnerability, which are to be found in the political realm. This included 'the political motivations behind refugees still living in uninsulated plastic tents eight years into a displacement crisis, in a middle-income country'.[20] Contending that the crisis facing refugees in Lebanon was ultimately one of insufficient access to political rights, he argued that 'a protection crisis requires a protection response'. In this case, the humanitarian response which did not challenge refugee's insecure political status also failed to address their precarious housing situation. We can see how a 'bounded' notion of vulnerability—framing it as a quality of certain individuals, groups or localities—results in depoliticizing vulnerability: By not examining the power relationships within which it is situated, it may not be able to achieve meaningful transformation. By obscuring structural injustices that underpin the vulnerabilities these programmes seek to address, it may even reinforce existing power structures.

Vulnerability as Bidirectional and Multi-scalar

The LHSP appears more closely aligned with a feminist understanding of vulnerability as it recognizes interdependency between the vulnerability of different groups and spheres of communal life. However, its theory of change lacks a sense of the 'bidirectionality' of vulnerability highlighted by feminist approaches (Gilson, 2021)—that is that openness to others always carries a risk of harm but is also the prerequisite for connection and positive exchange. In a model of vulnerability where refugees are viewed either as exerting 'resource pressures' on local residents (Aktis, 2018: 6) or as potential victims of inter-communal violence, their contributions to their host society are not recognized. The fact that both projects have impacts on much broader scales than those of their initial intervention points to the complex interactions and political relationalities of vulnerability. In Lebanon, this is reflected in the highly politicized nature of vulnerability programming.

The LHSP's approach to stabilizing refugee–host relations by replacing lost resources—whether employment opportunities or infrastructural services—aligns with wider public discourses in Lebanon describing refugees as drains on resources (Baylouny,

2020).[21] It also ignores the positive contributions that refugees make. As Brun et al. (2021: 38) note, 'Contrary to public belief, Lebanon has benefited from the presence of Syrian refugees'. Syrian migrant workers have played a significant role in rebuilding Lebanon after the end of its civil war (Chalcraft, 2009). Despite legal restrictions (Janmyr, 2016), Lebanon's need for low-wage and informal labour (Turner, 2015) has meant that Syrians work in a range of sectors including agriculture, construction and waste management (Longuenesse and Tabar, 2014; Saleh, 2016; Turkmani and Hamade, 2023). Refugees also frequently open their own businesses (Fawaz et al., 2018), shaping the economies of entire neighbourhoods (Yassine and Al-Harithy, 2021). The aid that Lebanon has received has delayed and attenuated the severe economic crisis (Brun et al., 2021).

Indeed, international agencies emphasize the ability of cash transfers to refugees to benefit the wider Lebanese economy. UNHCR notes that its programme enables 'refugees to contribute to the local economy by purchasing directly from local markets and shops' (UNHCR, 2021b: 1–2). In 2021, a programme document explains, over US $375 million 'was injected into Lebanon's economy' through cash-based interventions (Government of Lebanon, UNHCR and UNDP, 2022). Furthermore, according to different estimates, each dollar provided to refugees has a multiplier value between 1.5 (WFP, 2014: 18) and 2.13 (IRC, 2014: 32; see also Saferworld and LCPC, 2018; Samuels et al., 2020). This circulation of hundreds of millions of additional US dollars in the Lebanese economy every year 'compensates locals' (Lehmann and Masterson, 2020) and 'really goes a long way in this economy', according to one UN representative, as it supports the host state in a situation of monetary devaluation and wider economic crisis.[22] Cash programming may thus do little to transform households' situations in the longer-term, as we have seen (Chaaban et al., 2020: 19).[23] But it does appear to have had significant impact in stabilizing an economically vulnerable state.

The LHSP, too, has served to strengthen Lebanon's political arrangements. When it comes to service delivery, the Lebanese state is distinguished by its absence in people's everyday lives (Cammett, 2015; Mouawad and Baumann, 2017; Nucho, 2016). The LHSP served to strengthen the 'perceived capacity and legitimacy' of municipalities by delivering infrastructure projects (Aktis, 2016: 2). Thus, the illusion of a local government capable of delivering public services is created to generate trust in institutions and 'stabilize' a country routinely criticized for its inability to provide basic public goods, without meaningful reform (cf. Mouawad, 2017). Furthermore, as Nucho (2016) has noted, international aid programmes often work through 'communities', reinforcing sectarianism and further weakening the central state. While channelling aid through municipalities circumvents the problems that come with working with a dysfunctional national government,[24] intervening at this level may thus exacerbate underlying social instability (cf. Rocha Menocal et al., 2016). Indirectly, then, such stabilization efforts can avoid political change and shore up an untenable status quo (cf. Dinger, 2022).

When international actors aim to 'stabilize' Lebanese institutions by way of vulnerability programming while avoiding meaningful transformation, this might have as much to do with how they view the country's vulnerability as with the way in which they understand their own. Several UN representatives interviewed argued that the primary aim of international humanitarian aid and development funding directed at Lebanon is to contain the refugee crisis in the region:

> We're here to do a very specific job: to ensure the rights of refugees while they stay in Lebanon, and basically propping up the [Lebanese] state to host refugees, so that they don't come to Europe. So that's sort of the unwritten objective of the LCRP.[25]

To prevent the arrival of further refugees on their own doorstep, donor states provide large amounts of funding to Lebanon's crisis response, benefiting both refugees and locals (Fakhoury, 2022; Fakhoury and Stel, 2023). While ostensibly alleviating vulnerability of humanitarian subjects, this response also reduces the vulnerability of the host state, indirectly ensuring the impermeability of donor countries' own boundaries.

As we have discussed, a bounded view of vulnerability where only some are vulnerable maintains autonomy and self-sufficiency as the norm. Transposing these discussions from the level of individual bodies to that of states, Butler argues that defence of autonomy and separation is often the response of those seeking to defend their own sovereignty. She argues against such a denial of interdependency, stating: 'our very survival depends not on the policing of a boundary' but 'on recognizing how we are bound up with others' (2009: 52). Despite attempting to locate and alleviate vulnerability in particular individuals, groups or locations through sophisticated targeting tools, we see that these programmes have effects at a range of different scales, whether intended or inadvertent.

As vulnerability has become a 'shorthand for eligibility', as one INGO representative put it,[26] decisions about which groups or locations are deemed vulnerable determine significant funding flows, in Lebanon as elsewhere (cf. Sözer, 2020). Thus, in the fraught negotiations between international agencies and the Lebanese government over the aid response to the Syrian crisis (Dinger, 2022), how vulnerability was defined and assessed played a key role. The map of the 'Most Vulnerable Locations', for instance, was not updated for seven years despite significant changes in the spatial distribution of refugees.[27] Revised versions of the map were not approved by the Lebanese government as certain areas were no longer included—but needed to still receive resources to maintain Lebanon's sensitive sectarian power-sharing balance.[28] Similarly, a UNDP poverty assessment 'wasn't published because it showed that some rural areas became less vulnerable' after an inflow of aid. This 'didn't please the government', so the report was shelved.[29] Vulnerability in this context is a highly political concept which determines funding flows, upon which, in turn, political leaders depend to wield power, and foreign governments rely to maintain their own sovereignty. A perspective grounded in the assumption that vulnerability is both universal and relational thus draws attention to the complex political interdependencies and multiple scales of the vulnerabilities being addressed.

Towards More Transformational Vulnerability Approaches

The extensive resources and tools allocated to the assessment of vulnerability in the humanitarian-development field are a reflection of the need to reach those most in need in light of limited funds. Feminist scholars, too, argue that the value of recognizing vulnerability as a shared condition lies in ethical projects which prioritize particular forms of harm (Cole, 2016, Gilson, 2021; Rogers et al., 2012). Butler, for instance, distinguishes between two forms of vulnerability: precariousness—an ontological condition of all living things—and precarity—vulnerability created through political and social arrangements (Butler, 2009: 3, 31). We might understand the latter as akin to the 'produced' nature of risk in 'natural' disasters (Pelling, 1999). Prioritization of those who are 'most vulnerable' is therefore not merely required due to limited resources but also a political necessity. Yet as we have seen, while it enables targeting of interventions to specific beneficiaries, the 'bounded' approach risks missing other vulnerable groups and fails to address underlying causes. To overcome some of the issues discussed above, we outline in the following suggestions for integrating recent feminist and development perspectives on vulnerability with real-world operationalizations.

Labelling particular groups as 'vulnerable' can lead to stereotyping or paternalistic responses (Rogers et al., 2012). It suggests that vulnerability is an inherent characteristic and thus draws attention away from the political structures that make people vulnerable—thereby avoiding systemic change. Rather than devising only individual solutions, an approach starting with mutual dependence might seek to strengthen institutions that serve everyone. Thus, a member of a local NGO argued that the influx of large amounts of international funding could have been an opportunity to strengthen social infrastructures—especially, health and education, where Lebanon heavily relies on the private sector—rather than continuing to channel funding into privatized services (see also Bastagli et al., 2019: 69).[30] The example of the LHSP shows that interventions on the basis of a relational model of vulnerability may be more difficult to implement, as they require analysing numerous relationalities and engaging a wide range of actors. But they also have more transformative potential, especially in longer term development practice.

A focus on interdependency draws our attention to vulnerability's complexity—in both its multi-dimensional nature and its scalar effects. Viewing vulnerability through a feminist lens encourages us to attend to the way in which it is experienced differentially and what different responses are thus required (Gilson, 2021; Jean et al., 2023). A 'money-metric' approach to vulnerability like the Desk Formula, or a unified index as was considered by humanitarian actors, flattens out these different dimensions. As evaluations showed, and several respondents highlighted, cash transfers did little to address socially and politically grounded vulnerabilities. A multi-dimensional understanding of vulnerability as outlined by Naudé et al. (2009) therefore may require inter-sectoral approaches so that, for example, health issues are considered and addressed jointly with related questions of legal status. Additional awareness should also be given to the various scales at which both vulnerability and the interventions seeking to alleviate it operate (cf. Broad and Cavanaugh, 2011). Rather than framing scalar impacts such as economic stabilization merely as beneficial side effects, they should be acknowledged and incorporated into programme design.

An intersectional view thus highlights that people are differentially vulnerable in different areas of life but also that they might have social advantages to draw on as coping mechanisms (Jean et al., 2023) or skills and resources to offer others. A more generative understanding of vulnerability would result in aid programmes that recognize the agency of those deemed vulnerable. Including refugees, in Lebanon and elsewhere, in the process of devising longer term change, requires that hosts recognize their mutual interdependence as well as refugees' potential to contribute, rather than viewing them merely as a burden. The latter risks paternalistic approaches where decisions are made without accountability to those being supported, or competition over funding between refugees and hosts (cf. Dinger, 2022). Vulnerability understood as interconnection and potential for agency may lead to more self-determined, shared and transformative projects. Moore's work on redefining prosperity foregrounds the importance of establishing local meanings and contextually situated aspirations, and establishing new forms of collaboration with communities, as sophisticated metrics alone will not bring the large-scale change of direction required for achieving quality of life for everyone within planetary boundaries (Moore, 2015; Moore and Moreno, 2022). By following participatory project design methodologies such as those utilized in the LHSP, while crucially also including the vulnerable themselves in those processes, vulnerabilities can be jointly defined and addressed by those most affected (for examples of what such projects can look like in practice, see Baumann and Moore, 2023; Baumann et al., 2023). In this manner, an acknowledgement of our shared precariousness may allow us to mobilize vulnerability *both* to

support those in most urgent need *and* for collective projects that benefit everyone in development contexts.

IV. Conclusion

This article examined the way in which vulnerability is conceptualized and deployed by humanitarian and development organizations responding to the crisis of prolonged mass displacement from Syria to Lebanon. Reading the approaches of two key programmes through the lens of recent development and feminist scholarship on vulnerability has allowed us to interrogate the assumptions underpinning vulnerability programmes and to examine how these shape outcomes.

We have argued that, in Lebanon, international actors deploy both bounded and interdependent notions of vulnerability. In the bounded approach of UNHCR's cash programming, vulnerability is viewed as an aberration from an assumed state of independence, with aid provided to re-establish that self-sufficiency. While there is a trend towards increasingly exclusionary definitions of vulnerability and ever-more precise targeting in the humanitarian sector, a feminist lens draws attention to the shared nature of vulnerability. Vulnerability assessment tools such as the Desk Formula, used to channel almost half of the aid response in Lebanon through cash transfers to refugee households, embody the humanitarian quest for ways of measuring vulnerability that are 'scientifically' robust and utilize the most cutting-edge technologies. Such techno-managerial approaches to defining and combatting vulnerability may appear necessary to enable action in the immediate crisis response in a situation of insufficient funding. However, an excessive focus on the sophistication and refinement of sorting mechanisms diverts attention from the political causes and complex interdependencies of vulnerability. The flagship Lebanon Host Communities Support Programme seeks to address vulnerability through resource allocation for social stability. It also places significant emphasis on strengthening the reputation of local governments. A focus on interdependence reveals the need to think the vulnerabilities of refugees and hosts together rather than against each other, and the importance of recognizing the value that refugees add to host communities. It also draws our attention to the scalar effects of both programmes, whose interventions have political implications far beyond their initial scale of intervention.

The aim of this critical reading of humanitarian and development approaches to vulnerability in Lebanon has been to contribute to a conceptual discussion, pointing to its complexity, in order to open up a wider debate. Seeing shared vulnerability as a source of interconnection, rather than a criterion for exclusionary resource allocation, would result in different kinds of development approaches. We have suggested that several qualities of vulnerability have useful implications for development practice: (a) If we understand vulnerability as *relational*, an appropriate response is not based on singling out individuals or groups but building shared systems and institutions which address systemic causes of vulnerability; (b) If we accept that vulnerability is *multi-dimensional and multi-scalar*, the response should not attempt to capture this complexity in one ranking, but instead be intersectional and attentive to impacts beyond the scale of intervention; (c) An understanding of vulnerability as *interdependent and generative* would foreground the agency and contributions of those deemed vulnerable. This would then also necessitate joint projects in which refugees can become active participants in determining the conditions that affect them as much as host communities. Together with an understanding of the politically produced nature of vulnerability and the highly political nature of vulnerability interventions, these insights can contribute to more transformational responses.

As recent debates on vulnerability have sought to consider a wide range of factors

beyond income, livelihoods and poverty, so it has been widely argued that sustainable development requires measures of progress beyond economic growth (for an overview, see Mintchev and Moore, 2023). We have argued for development approaches that are contextual and support the growth of community capacities and capabilities—otherwise, they cannot be inclusive and sustainable. In settings of compounded crisis or extreme deprivation, vulnerability programmes too often focus on ensuring basic survival through a 'return to normal' rather than situating their work within transformative processes required for sustainable development. Therefore, theories that shape how we seek to combat suffering in humanitarian crisis should be better joined up with theories that inform development goals. How we define and measure key concepts like 'vulnerability' matters—not just for those who receive aid (or do not) in the immediate term, but for the long-term direction of development.

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Notes

1. Such a vulnerability-affirming approach is also increasingly echoed in popular discourses, where vulnerability is embraced as a new form of strength, in fields ranging from psychology (Brown 2012) to investment banking (Ervolini and Odean, 2014).
2. The number officially registered with UNHCR is lower, at approximately 850,000 (UNHCR, 2022).
3. Interviews, INGO representatives, October 2018, March 2019; local NGO representative, March 2019, April 2019.
4. Inter-sectoral workshop, October 2018.
5. Interview, UNDP representative, October 2018.
6. Interview, UNDP representative, October 2018.
7. Interview, UNDP and UNHCR representatives, October 2018. It is worth noting that parallel cash programmes exist for vulnerable Lebanese citizens, including the National Poverty Targeting Programme run by the Ministry of Social Affairs (Bastagli et al., 2019). Increasingly sophisticated vulnerability databases are also being developed for these national programmes with the input of international agencies (WFP and World Bank, 2021). Presentation, MoSA representative, October 2018.
8. These include arrival date, household size, gender, education level, presence of members with disabilities, age, as well as working family members (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2021: 98).
9. Interview, INGO representative, March 2019.
10. Interview, UNDP representative, October 2018.
11. Interview, UNHCR representative, May 2019.
12. Interview, UNHCR representative, May 2019.
13. Interview, UN representative, July 2018, point also reiterated by INGO representative, March 2019.
14. Interviews, former INGO representative, July 2018; former UN consultant, March 2019; INGO representative, March 2019; INGO representative, March 2019; local NGO representative, March 2019.
15. Interview, UNHCR representative, May 2019.
16. Interview, UNDP representative and head of LHSP programme, July 2018.
17. Interview, UNDP representative, July 2018.
18. Interview, UNDP representative, 3 October 2018.
19. LCRP Inter-Sector Planning Workshop on vulnerability, October 2018.
20. Interview, INGO representative, March 2019.
21. Interview, INGO representative, 26 March 2019.
22. Interview, UN OCHA representative, September 2018.
23. Interview, UNDP representative, 3 October 2018.
24. Interview, UNDP representative and head of LHSP programme, July 2018.
25. Interview, UNDP representative, March 2019.
26. Interview, INGO representative, March 2019.

27. Interview, UN OCHA representative, September 2018.
28. Interviews, UNDP representative, July 2018, and UNDP representative, March 2019.
29. Interview, UN OCHA representative, September 2018.
30. Interview, local NGO representative, April 2019.

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