

Towards a Realistic Approach for the Upgrading of Refugee Camps in Jordan

Minimal Change but Sustainable

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1 Shelter Situation Analysis

The status of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan is linked to political and socio-economic aspects. These have major influence on the future planning of the camps, on policy as well as settlement level. This paper will shed the light on the particular case of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan and try to come up with possible upgrading approaches resulting from the existing situation.

1.1 Paradoxical Status of Refugees in Jordan

- The status of the approximately 1.3 millions Palestinian refugees in Jordan is linked to political and socio-economic aspects. These have major influence on the future planning of the camps and the path this planning can take. The Palestinian refugees reside in Jordan for about four generations now and still think of the residence as temporary and only as a passer phase.

Social, economic and political aspects are driving forces to this matter as already mentioned. The political aspects of the Palestinian refugees' status lies in the right of return that grants the refugees the hope of going back to their original state and allows them the freedom to live on their properties among their neighbours and relatives. The Palestinian right of return has

been a central element of the Palestinian conflict and Diaspora that accompanied the refugees all along their lives. They were promised their right through several political achievements which, unfortunately, did not turn out to be of much success. According to several internet sites, an important and major resolution for the benefit of the Palestinian refugees was the General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of December 1948 which declared that:

“Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest predictable date”
http://www.palestine-un.org/res/2_194.html, cited on 29.12.2005.

On the other hand, various statements ensuring the opposite were stated by Israeli officials to inject the idea of having Palestinian refugees stay out of origin country:

“If these people find themselves resettled again in miserable refugee camps Judea, Samaria and Gaza, gazing out from them to their former villages, the tension and anger will be enormous ... the Palestinian refugee problem is a tragedy the Palestinians brought upon themselves. But one tragedy must not be replaced by another. If we want to continue living in this country, a solution to the refugee problem should be found elsewhere even if it goes against the Camp David Accords” (Sharon:
<http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRN/prissues.html>, 28.12.2005).

The different visions for the Palestinian refugees and the different influential political decisions on their destiny embodied the starting point for this research. Consequently, the research will set forth in a realistic manner that does not touch the critical political issues, but rather concentrates on the practical applicable topics that affects the present life of the refugees in those camps.

The economic aspects also consist of several subdivisions that have a great influence on the discussion, whether the camps are to be weighed as temporal or permanent settlements. They should be based on facts and statistics that can give us a clue how to decide realistically in this regard.

The refugee camps in Jordan are now more or less perceived and considered as additional villages in the rural areas and additional neighbourhoods in the urban ones. Therefore, the governmental institutions represented in the Department of Palestinian Affairs and the non governmental organisations represented in the United Nations for Refuge and Works Agency responsible for the Palestinian refugees in Jordan injected big sums of investments in the camps for their upgrading. Numbers to this regard were clear in the final report submitted by the Housing and Urban Development Corporation as an implementing organisation for governmental projects in poor areas in Jordan. The project planned to improve the infrastructure of 27 sites; 13 refugee camps (all Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan) and 14 squatter settlements in Jordan, which gives the indication that the government of Jordan in such a major strategically approach, served the needs of the normal poor settlements in the country and the refugee camps in one program. This is clearly shown in the table 2.1.

Services Area	Physical infra.	Social infra.	Hospital and colleges	Housing	Total
Camps	50792	44716	36705	30022	162235
Upgrading	39570	13977		7950	61497
Local Authorities	22797	25340			48137
Total	113159	84033	36705	37972	331436

Source: DPA and HUDC / final report 1997

This big investment in money as well as time and effort will not be addressed to settlements that are to be left over in the next coming years. So as a preliminary upshot, from an economic perspective and regardless from the emotional or political background, such undertakings within huge strategical undertaking would aim at improving and upgrading the existing situation for durable solutions and not temporal ones. Emphasizing the point here, it was

stated in the findings of the mission assessing the needs for the upgrading program that:

“Spatial planning of the communities was poor and was not intended for viable long term communities...poor delivery of infrastructure services such as water, sewage and roads” (Zagha 1997: 6).

On the other hand, thinking of temporal incidents and status of the refugee camps in Jordan, the land ownership issue. The land on which the refugee camps in Jordan are built is owned by the government. It is nevertheless, leased to the UNRWA to provide the refugees the homes they are settled in. In other words, the refugees in those camps can own the units or houses after the informal development they experienced but still do not own the land beneath them. In the same time, they have the right to buy and own any other property outside the camp. Ownership of land enforces the temporal status of the refugee camps in this discussion. Still, by way of contrast, the migration from refugee camps to cities and towns in Jordan is big evidence that most of the refugees already decided to live as Jordanians and this is more appealing than staying in camps under these circumstances.

Thus, a balanced contradiction is constructed in this case by listing up some of the existing and ongoing undertaking in those camps. Still, by weighing directions, durable status and eventually finding durable solutions for the upgrading weighs more to the matter of economic impact.

Social impact on the paradoxical status of refugee camps in Jordan lies in the middle way compared to the other two influential impacts. It is very difficult and almost impossible to decide whether refugees themselves and eventually any researcher in this particular field can know exactly if these refugees are willing to return or stay, and if at all their perception can be reflected in these few lines. Consequently, planning approaches are to be able to provide the Palestinian refugees with some attachment to the space they are residing in. They should try to promote the status of the refugees to be considered and accepted as normal Jordanian citizens. The needed planning approaches, in this sense, are to make the best out of the present and future of the Palestinian refugees.

The temporal/permanent status of Palestinian refugees will subsequently preserve its paradoxical character. The refugees are looking forward to a better status in Jordan, still cannot confess this decision because of the emotional complexity they have. The political opinion and influence are also not clear. The paradoxical case of the refugees' needs political decisions to determine the shift of status, it cannot be determined within such a study. Therefore, the status quo of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan is to be the starting point for the research. The social influence will provide this research with the basis, on which further upgrading strategies towards sustainable solution can be developed. The social investigation in the camp will provide a means for developing certain strategies based on the real understanding of their needs and future perspectives.

1.3 Actors in Shelter Delivery and their Roles

Two main organisations are responsible for the refugee shelter delivery in Jordan; the Department of the Palestinian Affairs (DPA) and the United Nations for Refugee Works Agency (UNRWA).

UNRWA was responsible for the social development of the refugees and tried with various social-upgrading ideas to promote the mentality, awareness and the self-esteem of the inhabitants in order to evoke the decision-making skills they could possess as well as creating independent people who are able to deal with their environmental challenges and eventually making use of their own potentials. These promoting actions yielded in creating women centres in the camps where the members and the employees are camp inhabitants. UNRWA also created many health and educational services and centres in the refugee camps in Jordan.

The department of Palestinian Affairs is on the other hand, the official governmental body responsible for the refugee camps in Jordan. It belongs structurally to the Prime Ministry of Jordan and is in charge of the upgrading plans and processes in the refugee camps in Jordan. The DPA contribution is mainly represented in the physical infrastructure projects in the camps, it supervised and managed those projects including the whole water, electricity and telephone networks as well as sewage, streets and pavements.

In other words, the types of services provided in the camps are efficiently distributed by the UNRWA and the DPA. The one focuses on the social infrastructure and the other concentrates on the typical physical upgrading of the camps.

1.4 Shelter Design and Development Problematic

Until the late 1990s, the Palestinian refugee camps had always the image of being dense with high population. The socio-economic conditions in them were generally poor cramped living conditions, unemployment and inadequate infrastructure such as roads and sewers. This can be seen on different levels; physical and social. The physical infrastructure includes the roads and pathways, in addition to the water network, surface drainage and the electrical works. The social infrastructure deals with the social facilities and non-physical basics of living, the parks, the social enclosures that are places where people can meet and interact instead of using the paths and streets, places where children can play instead of the narrow alleys which they find as playgrounds.

The DPA through a series of projects and investments that have taken place end of the 1990s and 2000s has tried to conduct massive development projects in the refugee camps. According to the empirical survey they were of great momental use and benefit. Unfortunately, the camps returned to its deteriorated image as soon as the project was used. Maintenance was not handed in this case. The UNRWA had spread wide range of services as previously mentioned. It worked towards the promotion of the independency of the refugees in their decision making and towards the integration with the other communities in Jordan.

The refugees and the camps however kept their image. They did not fully integrate and their spatial character have stayed the same. Many surveys were conducted to figure out what was going wrong and how can the camps be developed and upgraded. Many of those have failed. The type of surveys to investigate community potentials for development and the type of strategies towards such a development can be the reason. The call for new types of planning is resembled in an example of the living situation of a male refugee living in a well constructed house, working directly with the camp

improvement committee and with direct contact to the Department of Palestinian Affairs or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency representatives in the camp, differs quite considerably from that of a widow, who is starving and sick, is eking out a miserable existence in a prefab, still, cannot heal from the raining drops through her steel sheet ceiling in a remote and inaccessible area and therefore, remains invisible to the expert.

Subsequently, social surveys are not always giving the real picture of a settlement. Through such conventional surveys, the perceived needs and future development of the settlement by those less fortunate cannot get to surface. Therefore, planning networks inside the settlement will not be representative and successful.

The refugee camps have had enough investments and enough projects to promote their living standards to a great deal. In reality, it did not, so as friedman says: *What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? ... if one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result development (Friedmann 1992: 1).*

Consequently, the refugee camps do not have a shelter problem in the physical sense. There is a huge gap between the refugees' acceptance of aid and bringing it to their interest and between maintaining the development in order to have a sustainable growth and integration into the society in the future. The problem of the refugee camps is highly mentally. They have no motivation to be there and to flourish as long as the idea of them being excluded from the other communities stays alive.

The trend to such a problematic should tackle the reasons behind the demotivation, the refugee community is suffering from and towards self management that allows the refugees the decision making process they lost over time. In that, the image of the refugees will improve and their reputation as an enclosed community with many problems can slowly resolve and eventually gets more approached by nearby living communities.

2 Analysis of potentialities

"the self governance in a community, the right of the inhabitants to practise different faces of unions and communities in order to meet, determine their problems and solve them, and the freedom of choice and opinion, these all create an active responsible member of a community. Through a role similar to juridical jury role, they are able to practise and apply these rights; they feel confided and taken seriously. Eventually, they get responsible of not loosing these rights" (Tocqueville 1976)¹

We spent our lives hoping, tomorrow, next year and so on. We lived all our lives hearing that we will be compensated, that was a day and today is a day, nothing changed. But the hope is still there, we hope from God to return someday. But if we want to see the facts and the reality as it is, we became weak and our enemy is become powerful. This country is kind and generous to the people here. This country hired our daughters and sons; they should further see to their lives here and not spend it dreaming. We, our graves are open and waiting. What is Palestine, it's gone, and the new generations have to continue here, what shall I tell you more (interview: 91 years old man)

The idea is to stay in the camp, make it wider and more human...in the camp everyone knows everyone and even if you were away for weeks or months, when you come back, your brothers and family will still be here. If you get ill, everyone asks about you and passes by to check how you are doing or ask, why not having seen you in that day...here if you asked where is the house of x or y, everyone can get you to the person, all of us know each other like a big family (interview: 46 years old man)

Of course I will participate, if any approach was done for the camp, I will be there. 25% from the camp are unemployed. So if they made any places for

1 The cited text in German: Die Selbstregierung in der Gemeinde, das Recht und die Praxis der Bürger, sich in Vereinen zusammenschließen, um bestimmte Probleme zu lösen, die freien Parteien und die öffentliche Meinung machen die Bürger zu aktiven verantwortlichen Gesellschaftsgliedern. Durch die Geschworenengerichtsbarkeit werden sie in der Anwendung ihres Rechtes geübt, das sie als ihr Recht erfahren, das ihnen anvertraut ist und für dessen Anwendung sie verantwortlich sind

industrial courses, for computers and other skill, this will absorb a lot (interview: 46 years old man)

There is no chance, we hope someone will hear us, how can we think about anything if we know it will be nothing (interview: 21 years old boy)

I would love to earn money and be a productive member of the family, but they should respect that we cannot go and come...doing things at home and selling them is a good idea I think (interview: 33 years old woman)

It was obvious from the different interviews conducted in refugee camps, that the residents on their various types tried to see into the future of their camp and life.

The camps and the residents needed diverse types of strategies on their various typologies. However, the bottom line in all discussion matters was one, the proper reflection of the camp inhabitants. The real needs they had and the problems they face and the good dialogue between the residents and the local government governing and communicating their needs. Therefore, a well established regulatory system in the camps is crucially needed, one with direct contact to the residents and serious consideration of their potentials and needs.

The camps' residents should feel the urge of doing something to their lives and this can only be achieved if they were motivated to do so. The most proper strategical approach to that is by linking the solutions to the refugees through collaborative planning ideas. They are to decide what to be done and how. However, as Fung recommends: *“Giving the ordinary residents the absolute autonomy is not what is meant here, but giving it still to them along with what he called ad hoc forms of support for local autonomy” (Fung 2004:4).*

3 Proposal for Change

Participation may sound as the most proper solution for such a dilemma the refugees suffer from. However, it should be applied through a scheme of

collaborative planning that allows efficient self management and active participation and not more bureaucratic processes than the present situation.

Refugees have to gain their will and motivation again in promoting their lives and upgrading the most important issues concerning their wellbeing. They are not to lose the focus through being busy solving detailed individual problems that can be later on focused on through a certain framework of different levels of problematic. The focus should be, as a first step, on achieving a better dialogue with the local government that is in charge of elevating their problems to higher levels of institutions. This can be achieved through what is called joint development committees.

Joint development committees are to incorporate stakeholders from the different typologies of camp inhabitants in addition to representatives from the camp improvement committees along with representatives from the local government that have the decisive decision making right in this setting.

The university, being the institutional body that will conduct this integrated sustainable planning study with focus on better dialogue, will move hand in hand with these committees to ensure the effectiveness of the process and eventually the efficiency of the decision making process of the joint committees. It will have a representative joining these committees in the first stages of the collaboration. It will cooperate with the central government responsible for the camp upgrading and invite representatives to a launching venue for the program. This is aiming at gaining a reliable channel of information to pursue properly in the process.

Because of the sensitivity of the topic dealt with, the venue can find place at the university through a framework of applying urban management schemes that will be incorporated within the new master program at the School of Architecture and Design at the German Jordanian University in Spatial Planning. The program can be pursued through community gatherings and focus group discussions as well as future workshops at the cited camps for development to manage the promotion of the dialogue on site.