

A Socio-economic Perspective on the Urbanisation of Zaatari Camp in Jordan

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Abstract

Camps are temporal spaces where refugees are provided with humanitarian aid until durable solutions are made possible. During this period of ‘endless waiting’, these camps are planned to be economically self-contained. However, through time, refugee camps tend to urbanise: their initial empty spaces transform into vibrant markets, habitats and social spaces. In response to this ‘unexpected’ - and sometimes ‘unwanted’ - process, the economically self-contained system of camps breaks. This paper looks into the emerging socio-economic dynamics in Zaatari camp in Jordan, on the light of its urbanisation process and the Jordanian economy. It first explains the how humanitarian aid is provided, and then shows how and why, refugees use it to diversify the economy of the camp. The findings of this paper are then articulated on the existing policies to reduce the financial aid such as ‘self-reliance’ and ‘development’.

Keywords: Syrian refugees; Zaatari; camps; urbanisation; socio-economics; self-reliance; UNHCR; development.

Refugee Camps Urbanisation

Refugee camps were not often considered as spaces for architectural and urban studies. Attention towards camps as urban environments has increased with the politico-philosophical interpretations of camps as spaces of exclusion, bare life, control over life and death, dispositive, bio-politics, abjection and heterotopia (Agamben, 1998; Bussolini, 2010; Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986; Isin & Rygiel, 2007). These interpretations encouraged further investigation on the nature of this relationship between camps and cities, which has resulted into recognizing how camps and cities, both theoretically and practically, eternally link and intertwine (Agier, 2011, 2012; Grbac, 2013; Herz, 2012; Minca, 2005; Misselwitz, 2009). This urban ambiguity was named by Michel Agier as ‘camp-city’ (Agier, 2002). The demonstration of this particular relationship on the ground was seen in the process through which the oldest refugee camps in the world, the Palestinian –after more than 67 years of exile, have drastically transformed from anonymous tents and empty spaces, into habitats, households, markets, cultural hubs and social spaces; namely, refugee camps urbanisation.

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Today, the proliferation of the refugee crisis, and the prolongation of conflicts worldwide have made finding durable solutions for refugees more problematic; extending the average lifespan of camps from seven years to twenty years (Kennedy, 2004; Oxford University, 2012). Under these conditions, refugee camps are urbanising, however, with a very limited data available about this process; making it very challenging for the humanitarian organisations and the hosting states to deal with the conflicts and potentials rising from this inescapable process.

Urbanisation –the process of creating the city and the urban- is a multi-layered process that requires an integrated approach towards understanding its elements, layers, and actors, and how they interact and influence each other.¹ Socio-economics is an integral part of this process, however in camps; it has been frequently reduced to profiling, numbers and quantitative research.² This lack of association between socio-economics and the urbanisation of camps, has led to the failure of many policies and initiatives aiming to shift humanitarian operations from providing basic emergency aid, towards achieving self-reliance and development.

While this was observed and criticized on many other aspects like planning and community participation (Dalal, 2014; Hyndman, 1997; Misselwitz, 2009), achieving this transition is highly critical today especially that the UN Agency for Refugees (UNHCR) is currently supporting policies in favour of dismantling refugee camps whenever, wherever possible.³

Humanitarian Aid: Between Insufficiency, Self-Reliance and Development

Issued by UNCHR in July 2014, the new ‘exit’ policy does not only mean that thousands of new ‘homes’ that refugees built in camps could be destructed in any time; but it also shows the difficult financial situation that many humanitarian organizations are facing to maintain their operations and distribute aid. Long before this policy was issued, refugee camps were considered to be the Agency’s favourite choice where aid was thought to be easily delivered, distributed and monitored (UNHCR, 2014b). In fact, the survival of refugees in many cases is highly dependent on the distribution of humanitarian aid; especially in emergency phases, segregated camps and those located in remote areas like Zaatari camp, where interaction with the local economy is minimised.

¹ See for example the inspiring writings of Henri Lefebvre (1996).

² For example see (DiBella, 2007; Tiltne, 2007). However, one of the few contributions, and might be the sole one, that attempts to question refugee camps urbanisation from a socio-economic perspective is the study conducted in Dadaab camp in Kenya by the scholars De Montclos and Kagwanja (2000). In this study, the scholars investigate the emerging socio-economic dynamics within Dadaab camp, in relation to its economic and geographical context, and most importantly, taking the emerging ambiguous urban reality of the camp into consideration.

³ For more information see *Policy on Alternatives to Camps* (UNHCR, 2014a).

However, while humanitarian organizations struggle to acknowledge the urbanisation of camps rather than positively make use of this inevitable process, camps are majorly perceived as a ‘financial crisis’ especially in protracted situations. According to Meredith Hunter (2009, p. 2), ‘few donors or host countries have or are willing to provide the necessary resources to meet refugees’ needs beyond the initial emergency phase’. And with camps existing for longer time than expected, and millions of refugees reduced to passive recipients of aid, UNHCR was left with one solution: to support and promote the ‘self-reliance’ policy. Self-reliance is defined as ‘the ability of a community to function with a level of cohesion, social accountability and mutual dependence-taking decisions, mobilising resources, and building and maximising interpersonal capacity to address issues and initiatives for mutual benefit’. Therefore, self-reliance is not only a tool to empower refugees but also a mean of achieving ‘real and measurable’ impacts on the nature and costs of the agency’s programmes (UNHCR, 2005, pp. 2 &3).

As promising as this may sound, Meredith Hunter (2009, p. 2) noticed that, ‘the key focus of self-reliance policy is unmistakably the reduction of material assistance in line with falling UNHCR budgets’. However, in order to achieve that, ‘refugees are expected to exercise rights they do not have to achieve a degree of independence which is not even expected of local populations in the same context and without access to the bare minimum of resources’ (Hunter, 2009, p. 2). While the crisis of refugees and camps remain, at heart, a ‘rights’ issue; the policy of self-reliance lacks connection to the emerging urban reality of camps. Meredith Hunter (2009) noticed that self-reliance is constrained by different factors such as the unrealistic focus on agriculture to generate income; the spatial development of camps; and the agency’s inability to develop autonomous policies under which refugees can economically operate.

Today, and with the increasing financial pressure on UNHCR, the Agency is looking for new opportunities to support its operations in camps by introducing ‘innovation’ and ‘development’ as catalysts. In 2010, UNDP, World Bank and UNHCR started a project called *Transitional Solutions Initiatives* (TSI) that ‘engages humanitarian and development actors, as well as bilateral and multilateral donors, through successful inter-agency collaboration and tailored area-based interventions to increase the self-reliance of protracted refugees, IDPs and host communities’(UNDP & UNHCR, 2013).

Practically, the initiative aims to ‘prioritise displacement needs on the development agenda of governments and international development donors and other actors’ (UNHCR, 2010, p. 1). This step towards win-win solutions is very necessary; however, it underestimates camps as complex urban environments. This can be read throughout the TSI reports, where refugees narrate their success stories to establish businesses, while in a camp like Zaatarai for example, refugees, and with no ‘self-reliance’ policy whatsoever, have managed to establish a market that circulates around 10 million JDs per month (UNDP, 2012; UNHCR, 2015). This does not only invite us to re-think the

approaches and policies carried out by UNHCR in refugee camps, but also stresses on the need to observe and study camps as urban environments.

Methodology

Based on the previous, the aim of this paper is to look into the emerging socio-economic activities in Zaatari camp in Jordan, however, focusing on how they relate to the context and help to shape the urbanity of the camp. Therefore, it is necessary to stress on, that this paper does not present a classical socio-economic profiling but rather aims to merge, combine and compare between sporadic data -mostly quantitative- produced by humanitarian organizations operating in the camp and on-ground observations, interviews and notes.

The findings presented in this paper are parts of an overarching and ongoing research that aims to document, map and analyse the urbanisation of Zaatari camp and other Syrian camps in Jordan.⁴ The field research for this paper was done between February and April 2014, constituting from 10 full day visits. During these visits, structured interviews with specialists from UNHCR were conducted. However, the focus was given to the participant observations of the researcher in parallel to in-depth interviews with refugees from both genders and of different age groups. This was facilitated by the background and local experience of the researcher such as his ability to speak Syrian dialect.

While the research covered different aspects about the urbanisation of the camp such as the development of its physical-spatial and power structures, it is rather difficult to state the exact number of interviews as they took place continuously during the field visits. However, 5 long in-depth interviews with shop owners in different locations in the camp –in the main market and within neighbourhoods- were carried out. In order to deepen the relation between the different findings, a focused study was made in a cluster in the old camp. The cluster was chosen due to its location and urban settings: high density, concentration of resources, and developed social ties between its residents, which is an envisaged scenario for the whole camp if urbanisation continues in the same manner.⁵

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the field research was constrained by special permissions required from the Jordanian authorities to enter the camp. The dates of the visits did not always match the research plans which has influenced the structure of the research and required further flexibility in collecting data in the camp.

⁴ For more information see the master thesis: *Camp Cities between Planning and Practice: Mapping the Urbanisation of Zaatari Camp* (Dalal, 2014).

⁵ The direct findings related to the cluster rather portray the spatial-physical emergence of households, habitats and social spaces which were discussed elsewhere. See the article: *The Emergence of Habitat in Zaatari Camp in Jordan: Between Humanitarian and Socio-Cultural Order* (Dalal, 2013).

Jordan and its Informal Economy

Jordan is a country that is very well known for its scarcity of resources, major dependence on external funds, and most importantly, its sensitivity towards sudden demographical changes. Forced migrations and influxes of refugees in 1948, 1967, 1991, 2003 have resulted in various economic pressures on Jordan's economy and labour market (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2010). The inability of this economy to expand and adapt to these demographical changes is not surprising when compared to the economy's main characteristics: fluctuating rates of unemployment; low crude rates of participation; imbalanced labour market; imbalance in sectoral distribution; and imbalance in geographical distribution. Moreover, by adapting neo-liberal and consumerist strategies, the Jordanian market increasingly shifted towards services (reaching 79% of all sectors), while agriculture dramatically fell from 16.8% in 1973, reaching 2% in 2010 (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2010).

This neo-liberal model has not only influenced culture, society and politics in Jordan - which discussing is beyond the scope of this paper; but has also produced acute tensions regarding the scarcity of resources and job opportunities in the kingdom. This has resulted in 44% of the whole labour market in Jordan operating under the 'informal' sector, which involves all economic activities that are 'not registered under specific forms of national legislations', and thus, not exposed to taxations (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2010, p. 4).

In 2011, proliferating waves of displaced Syrian started to seek refuge in Jordan, increasing the pressure on its fragile economy. Although, locally, Syrians are very well known for their skills in business and efficiency as labour force, the government decided to restrict their involvement in the labour market. But with almost half of the Jordanian economy operating 'in the shadow'; Syrian refugees easily found their way into the labour market. The concentration of refugees in Al-Mafraq governorate transformed it into 'one of the most economically booming provinces in Jordan' (Freihat, 2014). This was accompanied with a rise in international aid reaching three times of what the kingdom used to receive before 2011 (Freihat, 2014). However, in the absence of comprehensive policies that would organize the distribution of funds and aid to achieve local development; societal tensions and discrimination against refugees as 'cheap' labour force aroused.

Zaatari Camp as a Self-Contained Economic System

The majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan originate from the mid-southern governorates in Syria, which shares a lot of history, tradition and kinship with the Northern part of Jordan. Due to that and the proximate distance to the borders, the northern governorates have been facing a sudden and huge concentration of Syrian refugees. This situation has put much pressure on the scarce resources available, including the public services, education and health

system, real estate market, economy and labour market. And despite the humanitarian assistance offered for refugees from different organizations, a significant number of refugees worked 'illegally' in construction, agriculture and service sectors (UN, 2014a).

This explains the results of an early survey conducted in the northern governorate of Al Mafraq in 2012, where a huge majority of 80% affirmed that Syrian refugees should be segregated from the community in a camp (MercyCorps, 2013). Few months later, the camp was opened in a remote area, planned to host around 10,000 refugees (UN, 2014b). However, at that time, and according to a local newspaper, Jordan had already welcomed 140,000 refugees, and was receiving around 1500 to 2000 refugees everyday (Al-Rai, 2012).

The increasing waves of refugees arriving in Jordan implied drastic transformation on Zaatari camp. Not only stretching it from the size of a small farm to the size of a city in a relatively short time, but also requiring more humanitarian aid to be distributed for refugees within the camp. In mid-2013, UNHCR estimated around 350,000 refugees living in the camp (UN, 2014b). This number, however, has gradually decreased, where refugees either repatriated back to Syria, or were able to leave the camp through a Jordanian bailout system. At the time of this research, officials estimated around 80,000 refugees living in the camp.

Refugee camps are extraterritorial zones, usually rented from the hosting states by the Agency to establish camps over them. Within the boundaries of these camps, refugees are reduced to war victims, and thus, to mere recipients of aid.

In Zaatari camp, and upon arrival, refugees are offered basic food rations such as rice, lentils, bulgur and oil; in addition to Non-Food Items (NFIs) such as mattresses, sheets and tents. The amounts of rations depend on the number of persons per family. For instance, each person receives 1 kilo of cereals, while each 4 persons can get 1 bottle of oil. As for NFIs each person receives one mattress, however, families consisting from more than 5 members get no more than 4 mattresses, according to an interviewed refugee.

The distributed humanitarian aid fails to fulfil refugees' needs in the immediate present. As this occurred in different camps around the world, the shortage does not seem to be related to context, culture, size nor location; but to the 'emergency' nature of aid (Agier, 2002; Herz, 2012; Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000). The distribution of aid as food rations and NFIs aims to support refugees with basic needs - with minimum assets to survive. However, once these basics are fulfilled; cultural and individual needs yearn for fulfilment. This moment sparks the emergence of socio-economics.

In an attempt to support the camp with goods beyond the basic humanitarian aid, the Agency provided two locations each for a Jordanian

Supermarket (Safeway and Tazweed) where a variety of goods could be bought via vouchers provided by the World Food Program (WFP). Every refugee is entitled with one voucher every 15 days according to an interviewed refugee.⁶ However, neither the purchase value of vouchers, nor the options found in the Jordanian malls fulfil the need of refugees. As one refugee explained, ‘...you know our food! Fresh meat, chicken and lots of vegetables...Not like the food we find in malls...frozen and tasteless!’⁷

The gap between monthly expenditures and income is another factor in the emergence of socio-economics. Interestingly, an ACTED (2013) study in Zaatari camp on a household level revealed that the total average of expenditure was 292 JD, whereas the total average income was 208 JD, leaving an average deficiency of 84 JD per month. The study does not state how incomes were gained; however, it states further, that only 20% of respondents had zero income and are dependent on their family savings, while 80% earned income in the last 30 days of the interview (ACTED, 2013). Noteworthy, the study was not implemented on a camp level; however, these results still indicate vital socio-economic dynamics that were observed as follows.

Income Generating Activities

Selling of Humanitarian Aid

Obviously not a new trend, the sale of food rations offered by humanitarian organisations was claimed to be ‘one of the most controversial means of capital accumulation in the camps’ (Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000, p. 216). Currently, the ‘classic’ food rations are substituted with vouchers of 10 JDs which could be seen circulating everywhere in Zaatari camp. Due to their purchasing value, refugees tend to sell them for a lower price (mainly 9 JDs). The money is then either accumulated, used in other businesses or simply used for buying assets that are not found in malls, nor provided by the humanitarian organisations like clothes and accessories.

However, there appears to be certain refugees who have taken on the responsibility of collecting, subsidising and circulating vouchers. Moreover, it was observed that refugees used vouchers to buy goods directly from the refugees’ market. No further information was obtained on how these vouchers end up at the Jordanian malls where they are supposed to be exchanged for food; however, this indicates the complexity of dynamics that the process of selling food vouchers generates in Zaatari camp.

NFIs are also a part of this process. Between March 2013 and February 2014, the population of the camp has drastically decreased from around 350,000

⁶ Recently, these vouchers were substituted with electronic debit cards, charged with 20 JDs per month (UNHCR, 2015).

⁷ This quotation underlies the influence of political and economic systems on socio-culture, which can be interestingly seen between two close countries like Syria and Jordan. However, such comparisons are beyond the scope of this paper.

refugees to 80,000 refugees. Therefore, many distributed NFIs such as caravans were either left away, sold or inherited (REACH & UNHCR, 2013). This had an accelerating impact on the urbanisation of the camp, and facilitated the spatial development of household and the emergence of habitat.⁸ Due to that, caravans became, as well, an essential part of the exchange market in Zaatari camp, with a purchase value ranging between 300 to 600 JDs, depending on its quality and materials.

Cash for Work (CfW)

Defined as ‘a short-term intervention used by humanitarian assistance organizations to provide temporary employment in public projects’; cash-for-work is the only official way through which refugees can earn money in the camp (Mercy Corps, 2007, p. 2). The purpose of these programmes, however, is not to increase the income of refugees or promote self-reliance, rather they are ‘jobs required by the organizations to fulfil their role in the camp’ (NRC, 2013, p. 17).

Table 1. CfW opportunities available in Zaatari camp mid 2013 (Source: NRC - unpublished)

Employer	Type of Work	Number of Jobs	Sex	Qualification
ACTED	Garbage collection and cleaning	700	Male and Female	None
NRC	Distributing and building tents and aluminium cubic tent extensions.	120	Male	Semi-skilled in construction
Save the Children	Assistant teacher at KG	80	Female	Literate

An unpublished NRC report (2013) counted around 900 jobs made available by NGOs at that time (see table 1). The majority of jobs offered by ACTED circulate among refugees in order to benefit as many refugees as possible. The selection of refugees is made through a site engineer assisted by a street leader.⁹ In every cycle a refugee is hired for 7 days earning 1 JD per hour (NRC, 2013). However, while this might be the only opportunity to earn an income for many refugee families who are not engaged in any economic activity; the report estimates that ‘an individual may get their turn in employment once every 43 weeks a year, or each household could benefit for 2-3 weeks a year from paid work with one of the NGOs in Zaatari’ (NRC, 2013, p. 18). Therefore, although

⁸ For more information see (Dalal, 2014).

⁹ Street leaders emerged in the absence of official communication and governance channels between refugees and humanitarian organisations. They played a very important role at early phases of the camps urbanisation process and manipulated its power structure. For more information see (Dalal, 2014).

a good opportunity, CFW alone is not enough to cover the monthly deficiency of 84 JDs per household. This is, however, unless refugee circulations were manipulated by street leaders, which was frequently reported.

The Market¹⁰

'Have you been to the *Souk*? It is something like you have never seen in your life before!' is what a Jordanian officer said in order to express his confusion about the emerged market in the camp. Unquestionably one of the most significant aspects of urbanisation, the market, is not only a mean for generating income, but also a demonstration of resistance, and a strong will to survive. The hybrid result of advanced urbanity and limited materiality expresses how refugees rejected victimisation. On the contrary, they established all kinds of business that one expects to see in a city, which justifies the reaction of the Jordanian officer.

Public Space as an Economic Drive

Images from the UN Satellite service (UNOSAT) show that the market first appeared between September 2012 and January 2013. Starting as a set of shacks facing the main street in the older camp; it now stretched for more than 2 kilometres inside the whole camp. According to the UNHCR site planner Mohammed Jertila, 'asphalted streets usually facilitate the emergence of markets in camps...people make this to keep themselves busy'; however, the market in Zaatari camp did not appear on 'any' asphalted street. Interestingly, almost all main facilities (hospitals, clinics, schools and distribution points) were planned facing two perpendicular streets. The need for these facilities to be used by many refugees every day transformed them into spaces of vitality, busyness and social interaction – an unplanned 'public space'.

However, public spaces are increasingly reviewed from the perspective of struggle over property, sovereignty, democracy and emancipation in a city context, and therefore are very problematic when discussed in a refugee camp. Petti and Hilal (2013, p. 8) addressed the problem by saying, 'the public in camps does not have a political body responsible for the collective interest'. While Manuel Herz (2012, p. 488) argued 'public and private are categories that can normally be conceived of a relation of a state...Hence, in the absence of the home country and with the hosting nation unwilling to grant civil rights, we can say that the categories of public and private do not apply in a refugee camp'.

In Zaatari camp, it was not easy to determine whether the spaces surrounded by the market were 'public' or not. For refugees, it was considered as a distinctive spatial component of the camp. One shop owner explained: 'people like to walk here, even if they don't want to buy. They keep coming and going all the time... even after midnight. Oh, this place doesn't sleep at all!' While a widowed women from the camp replied: 'I enjoy walking in the market with

¹⁰ The main market has been intensively referred to as the 'Champs-Élysées' by the media, whereas refugees simply call it the *Souk*.

my friends. I feel comfortable to be surrounded with all these people...as if I was walking in old *Souks* of Damascus'.¹¹ However, if no political or sovereign entity can declare or protect this space to be titled as 'public', who can?

A question was asked to different shop owners in Zaatari camp: 'what would happen if you want to extend your shop more into the street? What would you do if your neighbour extended his business in front of your shop?' The immediate reaction of the interviewed refugees was clear 'no, this can't be. And if it happened, everyone here will stop it'. Who is 'everyone' and why will they stop it? In the absence of legislators, refugees relied on an already existing societal system of values – a system that consolidates solidarity and commitment towards communal values – to define the market as public space. While this point remains very debatable, similar influence of socio-culture on the spatial-physical transformation of the camp, as well as its power structure, were strongly observed.¹² An articulation of that on our cities would be interesting to see, however, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Photo 1. A small shop within the most urbanised part of the camp



A Syrian-Jordanian Partnership?

In August 2013, around 685 shops were located in Zaatari camp (ACTED, 2013).¹³ These are composed of either a caravan or two connected together, or a construction of metal sheets and wooden structures (see Photo 1). Those varied from small kiosks and barber shops to electricians, butchers and super markets. Necessary elements for these trades are smuggled inside the camp.

¹¹ In Damascus, *Souk Al-Hamediyeh* is one of the most famous and vibrant markets in old city which interestingly have similar arrangement to that of the market in Zaatari camp.

¹² For more information see (Dalal, 2014).

¹³ Today, UNHCR (2015) counts around 2500 shops located in the market and around the camp.

However, the absence of regulations or any kind of supervision is subjecting shop owners for abuse as they have to pay extra fees for Jordanian security forces at the gate (NRC, 2013).

According to a shop owner, the majority of shops in the camp are financed by Jordanian entrepreneurs. These provide the necessary capital to buy goods and smuggle them inside the camp in cooperation with Syrian refugees that are willing, or have already, established their own businesses in the camp. While this might be a risky investment for refugees who would need to use their family savings and rely on the support of their relatives abroad to establish businesses; it would greatly benefit those entrepreneurs who are using the camp as a 'tax-free' zone. By that, and despite the attempts to economically isolate the camp and keep it self-contained, it became a part of Jordan's 'informal' economy. This is not new in refugee camps as a similar approach was also observed in the market of Dadaab camp (Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000). However, other connections to the camp were made under 'formal' economy. These are the two Jordanian malls that supply the camp with food. Although the impacts and tensions between these Jordanian malls and the *souk* should be further investigated; one shop owner claimed that these are having bad influence on the vitality of the camp's market.

From Suspended Law to Ownership

It was estimated that a shop in the main market is expected to generate an income of 1000 to 2000 JDs per month – around three to six times more than the average of monthly expenditures, according to a shop owner. This indicates not only the huge amount of capital circulating in the camp, but also the possible reflections on social hierarchies, power structure, class, identity, habitat and ownership. For instance, as the market mushroomed along the main streets, refugees who first occupied these locations became owners of properties. While the market was flourishing, these properties started to gain value. For instance, the price of a shop can reach up to 6000 JDs according to its size, location and quality of furniture and decoration. Moreover, in the absence of a legislative system, a contract, internally approved by the refugee community, is signed between the different parties in order to 'legalise' the process of selling or renting of the property. The contract includes information such as the size (area), location (next to, in front of 'refugee name'), and price; and is then signed by refugees who witnessed the process, according to interviewed shop owners.

However, shops are not exhaustively located in the market. Refugees have also established businesses connected to their households in order to generate income (Dalal, 2014). A recent UNHCR survey shows that this phenomenon is spreading in all districts of the camp, transforming them into mixed-used quarters (Dalal, 2014).

Misselwitz (2009, p. 182) states that 'the presence of businesses and other commercial activities in refugee camps is one of the clearest indications of urbanisation'. However in well-urbanised Palestinian camp like Deheishe in the

West Bank for instance, 77% of all businesses appeared after 1994, which according to Misselwitz indicates that ‘urbanisation is part of the camp’s more recent history’ (DiBella, 2007; Misselwitz, 2009, p. 182). Compared with Zaatari camp where UNHCR (2015) suggests that the retail activity equates to approximately 10 million JDs per month; it could be said that Zaatari camp is urbanising faster than Palestinian camps where the economy ‘remained marginal and education became the main route for improving the socio-economic status of individuals’ (Al-Qutub, 1989, p. 99). This point becomes very crucial when discussing the camp’s future development, and invites us to rethink refugee camps and their structures as they stand today.

Other Possibilities

Other income generating activities emerged in Zaatari camp out of public demand and personal interest. For instance, smuggling of goods and of people was reported as one of the best opportunities to make money in the camp. Smuggling however, requires strong connections to a Jordanian partner who is expected to support the process either on borders or outside of the camp.

Photo 2. A refugee carrying goods



Within a city-sized camp, the need to convey goods and caravans from a district to another is an exhausting mission due to the huge distances. Therefore, many refugees –the majority being youth and kids- have made use of this opportunity to generate income by conveying goods and assets on trolleys (see Photo 2). They can be seen roaming everywhere around the camp and waiting around the gate of the camp. The same applies for caravans where a special conveyer was designed by refugees using available materials, so they can be placed on the conveyer and pushed by men to the requested location (see Photo 3).

Another possibility to earn income in the camp is by sifting earth in order to separate sand and rocks, which are then sold in order to be used for creating

cement mixtures, which are used in the development of households and habitats. Street vendors were also observed around the base camp and humanitarian offices selling daily needs from cigarettes to tea and coffee.

Figure 3. Caravan conveyer designed by refugees



Conclusions

Refugee camps have always been present as a quick and ‘easy’ solution, which puts the humanitarian organisations and the hosting countries in a better position of controlling refugees and providing services. However, the attempts to paralyse and suspend normal life within the boundaries of camps seem to be always a failure, and more, a source of further complications for all parties involved.

For instance, the current model through which camps are planned as a self-contained economic system based on the homogeneity of a passive mass of recipients, namely refugees, is very unrealistic. The example of Zaatari has shown how refugees managed to establish connections with the informal Jordanian economy, challenging the camp’s economic and juridico-political isolation. Moreover, the paper showed how refugees succeed to transform the standardised humanitarian aid into cycles of economy, all pouring into a more holistic, dynamic and multi-dimensional process, namely the camp’s urbanisation.

From a socio-economic perspective, the diversification of resources and demands created within the camp and their spatial connotation represent a shift from a camp towards a city. This shift could be interpreted as a call for ‘the right to the city’ inside what could be seen as an ‘anti-city’. This call, does not only invite us to reflect on the dichotomies of camps-cities/ refugees-citizens, in a world where the crisis of the displaced, migrated and border-crossers are

reaching momentum; but also provides new grounds upon which the provision of humanitarian aid and how it intersects with development could be globally and locally revisited.

For instance, policies such as self-reliance represent a sort of escapist policy to reduce financial burdens on UNHCR as it stands. A shift towards development is urgently needed. However, it requires much more attention towards local dynamics, context and actors. In refugee camps, the emergence of structures and connections through which empty spaces such as camps develop into cities, is mostly neglected. With disregard to the emerging urban reality of camps, it is rather useless to expect the success of policies that focus on solely improving the socio-economic situation of refugees. By shifting attention towards achieving real development with the active participation of all actors, socio-economics necessarily becomes a part of other systems in the camp, where its improvement implies the improvement of habitats, households, social spaces, infrastructure, governance structures, and vice versa.

Acknowledgment

The findings of this paper were partially presented in the author's thesis "*Camp Cities between Planning and Practice: Mapping the Urbanisation of Zaatari Camp*" submitted in 2014 for obtaining a master degree in Integrated Urbanism and Sustainable Design (IUSD) between Stuttgart University (Germany) and Ain Shams University (Egypt).

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SYRIAN REFUGEES IN ZAATARI CAMP IN JORDAN

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