Co-funded by the European Union

german cooperation
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

Spanish Cooperation

QUDRA 2

Resilience for refugees, IDPs, returnees and host communities in response to the protracted Syrian and Iraqi crises

SOCIAL COHESION GUIDANCE NOTE

How to address the issue of aid bias

Implemented by

aecid

Enabel

EXPERTISE FRANCE
GROUPE AFD

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

HUNGARIAN INTERCHURCH AID
HIA-HUNGARY

BACKGROUND

About Qudra 2 social cohesion guidance notes

Qudra 2 is a regional programme seeking to strengthen resilience for Syrian refugees, displaced persons, returnees and host communities in response to the protracted Syrian and Iraqi crises. The programme operates across different thematic sectors in Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey. One of its main objectives is to strengthen social cohesion. After three years of implementation, various local implementing partners in the four Qudra 2 countries came together virtually to discuss their intervention strategies and the impact on social cohesion. Based on these discussions, five guidance notes were developed to elaborate possible solutions for the common challenges identified.

Who is this guidance note for?

Implementers of a programme within the context of flight, migration and displacement who want to address the issue of aid bias.

What is its purpose?

To provide practical steps to ensure that the project does not reaffirm negative perceptions of aid, and to actively counter misinformation and misperceptions of aid.

INTRODUCTION

Aid bias is one of the leading factors that drive tensions between groups that are perceived as benefitting from aid and groups that feel excluded. Aid bias acts as a 'divider'. In the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, host communities frequently report feeling unjustly excluded from international aid. The worsening economic conditions in the four Qudra 2 countries have increased vulnerabilities among the host populations, which have in turn increased perceptions that the distribution of aid is unjustly focused on the refugee community.

Aid bias is about perceptions and implementers need to design, implement and communicate about their projects in ways that address these perceptions. According to a 2021 study,[1] in contexts of forced displacement, "perceptions of assistance influence cohesion dynamics more than the actual support provided". The research found that assistance can exacerbate tensions "where social discontent among the host community already exists and where institutions are perceived to be failing to address those concerns".

CATEGORIES OF AID BIAS

Qudra 2 partners identified that **drivers of aid bias fall into three broad and interconnected categories**:

1. **Individual perceptions and negativity bias:** This is the tendency to focus on negative news, explains why people readily believe information or rumours related to alleged aid bias.
2. **Political environment:** This is conducive to the spread of misinformation. A lack of long-term strategies for dealing with displaced populations in the region and the manipulation of 'the refugee issue' by political actors in pursuit of their own agendas make the issue of aid a convenient topic for pressuring international actors for financial assistance and for mobilising constituencies. The fact that aid and international

1 C.Lowe et al, Humanitarian assistance and social protection in contexts of forced displacement: effects on social cohesion, Overseas Development Institute, 2022, https://odi.org/en/publications/humanitarian-assistance-and-social-protection-in-contexts-of-forced-displacement-effects-on-social-cohesion/

development assistance are not covered by the mainstream media, and low levels of trust in the government, also enable misinformation and the spread of fear.

3. **Aid delivery:** This is characterised by real and perceived corruption and inefficiency; the provision of certain types of assistance exclusively to displaced populations (especially those funded through humanitarian funding streams); the use of ratios to determine beneficiaries based on status rather than vulnerability (i.e. 70% refugees, 30% host community members); the provision of cash assistance or reimbursement of transportation costs in different currencies; and the transfer of cash assistance to a large number of Syrian refugee beneficiaries in one day (instead of across several days), resulting in visibly long lines of refugees forming at ATMs.

HOW TO ADDRESS AID BIAS TO SUPPORT SOCIAL COHESION

Step 1

Ensure that all staff involved are aware of the meaning and problem of aid bias

↓

Step 2

Include aid bias analysis in the context analysis

↓

Step 3

Choose intervention areas & beneficiaries based on clear criteria & communicate choices to a wide range of stakeholders

↓

Step 4

Assess risk of unintentionally feeding aid bias & put in place mitigation measures

↓

Step 5

Include the issue of aid bias in communication plan

↓

Step 6

Advocate for addressing policies that lead to aid bias

Step 1: Ensure that all staff are aware of and understand aid bias

There has been limited research into aid bias and, because it relies on expensive perception surveys, reliable data is often difficult to obtain. **Staff need to be aware of the problem of aid bias and how to stay informed on public perceptions of aid.** Training new staff on aid bias can help sensitise staff to the issue. Furthermore, staff who are in frequent contact with community leaders, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, need to be aware of how to create a safe space for people to share concerns about aid bias, and how staff can report such concerns internally within the implementing organisation and externally to the donor.[2]

In Lebanon, the perception that unfair aid distribution is a source of tensions has been growing steadily since 2018. In 2022 over a quarter (26.3%) of Lebanese and Syrian refugees believed aid was a driver of tensions. Furthermore, 83% believed that vulnerable Lebanese have been neglected by international aid programmes, an increase from 75% in 2018.

Guiding questions to ask in meetings with local authorities and community members to collect information on aid bias

- What do different groups (including host communities of different backgrounds and social status as well as refugees) in this area think of international aid and assistance? To what extent do they feel that aid reaches the people who need it most?
- To what extent do different groups trust local civil society organisations, national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international NGOs and why? To what extent do people differentiate between national and international NGOs?
- To what extent do different groups trust the local authorities and representatives of national institutions at the local level?
- How do they think trust in these institutions could be increased?

Step 2: Include analysis of aid bias in the context analysis

Perceptions of aid bias should be included in the context analysis during the process of developing a project. When exploring levels of trust in authorities among different groups, their perceptions of unfair aid and assistance should be explored. This will help the team to design a project that does not exclude any groups who are in need of assistance, and potentially include activities to counteract misinformation and spread awareness of the broad impact of aid. By involving diverse beneficiaries in the design of projects – both through needs assessments and consultations/workshops on the context dynamics – perceptions of aid bias can be clearly captured and the factors behind these perceptions understood. It should be noted that the different roles and compensation systems for project staff, external consultants and the staff of local institutions working with the project can also contribute to a perception of unfairness.

2 UNDP-ARK, National perceptions surveys on social tensions, Lebanon, 2018-2022

Step 3: Choose intervention areas/beneficiaries based on clear criteria and communicate your choices widely

The selection of areas and beneficiaries for an intervention can trigger a negative perception of the project and of international assistance more broadly. The choice of target areas by donors and implementers should be clearly evidenced by need to address the problem of aid bias. Consultations with institutional representatives are important, but insufficient, especially in areas where data is scarce and institutional practices are not transparent. Therefore, implementers of social cohesion projects should conduct participatory assessments involving a range of stakeholders and potential beneficiaries.

Decisions on target areas and beneficiary groups are complex and involve multiple and often conflicting considerations. It is essential that all staff are trained to communicate sensitively and consistently on these issues. Frontline staff are most likely to come across negative comments and complaints from local people and should be prepared to respond professionally and explain the project targeting approach. In some cases, frontline staff may need to be trained and regularly updated on other programmes available in the area that provide additional services or target groups not included in the project.

Guiding questions for including issues related to aid bias in a context analysis

- Which are the main groups in the area that receive aid/assistance/a particular service? How are they selected and who is excluded, and why? Who was consulted or involved in the selection process? Have targeting criteria been clearly communicated?
- What are the root causes and triggers of conflict? Is aid among them? What are the main narratives around aid in the target area?
- Do men and women of different groups think the distribution of aid/services is fair? Why?
- To what extent do men and women of different groups trust institutional service providers? And to what extent do they trust local/national/international NGOs?

Step 4: Assess and mitigate the risk of unintentionally feeding aid bias

As part of the project risk assessment, implementers should consider the risk of unintentionally confirming or strengthening existing biases. Such risks may arise from working with institutions that may be perceived as biased; the use of venues that are owned by influential community members (who may be seen as biased); or even the procurement of materials from particular companies. Strategies need to be put in place to minimise such risks, such as additional consultations to verify data provided by authorities to mitigate the risk of favouritism, as well as the clear communication of decision-making procedures.

Establishing complaints mechanisms is recommended as part of protection strategies and can increase the voice of beneficiaries and communities. Such mechanisms can also be useful in identifying perceptions of bias. Qudra 2 partners recommended raising awareness in the community about the available aid, while also sharing information on complaints channels. When setting up complaints procedures, it is important to develop a transparent process for how complaints are handled, as well as to whom the issue and the solution will be reported and how.

Guiding questions that project staff need to be prepared to answer

- Why are you working on A when we need B?
- Why are you working in area A and not in area B?
- Why are you helping group A when group B needs help?
- How do you know who needs assistance? How did you choose the participants in your programme?
- Why did you consult A in the planning of the project? They are biased.
- Why are you working with consultants when X can do this work for less money?

Step 5: Include the issue of aid bias in the communication plan

The issue of aid bias should be included in the project's communication plan, especially when bias is a key driver of tension. Communication plans will differ significantly depending on the context and whether a project works directly to improve social cohesion or focuses on other issues while addressing social cohesion indirectly. Some key elements of a communication plan are outlined below, based on the experiences of Qudra 2 partners:

- **Communicate about the project, its objectives and target groups.** Develop clear messaging in accessible language, avoiding development jargon (such as 'target group'). In some contexts the visibility of donors and their communication guidelines may need to be adapted to highlight less the targeting of refugees to avoid negative reactions by the host community. Some partners have used public 'transparency boards' in front of project facilities to display information about the project, the donor, the activities and the beneficiaries. Other partners displayed information on the services provided in migration centres, stating that users should never pay for services or participation. Such information should also be readily available with frontline staff, who may also need training in how to respond to difficult questions, complaints or incorrect statements about the project, the implementer or the donor. Images and language used in communications need to be inclusive and avoid creating perceptions of bias, for example, by portraying women and children as victims.
- **Words and language matter.** Qudra 2 partners have highlighted the need to stop using language such as 'refugee projects' when projects target local communities and/or support institutions and local service providers. In another example, community centres in Turkey, established in the early years of the crisis to serve refugees, were given names in Arabic. This created the impression that all aid was targeted at the refugees and vulnerable Turkish citizens were unfairly excluded. Sharing information in different languages is important for reaching the wider community and is also often seen as symbolic.
- **Counter misinformation – both in person and on social media.** This includes sharing accurate information from reliable sources (academic or UN agencies) about the most contentious issues. This might include the amount of cash assistance provided to refugees, the type of aid available to host communities, and the positive impacts of aid to refugees on local communities. Projects directly addressing social cohesion can also support local journalists to report on refugee issues professionally, using accurate facts and refusing to publish unconfirmed information. Furthermore, research recommends that projects provide cash assistance (as opposed to items) and accompany it with information on the "economic benefits that are derived to the wider community".[3]
- **Consider activities with low visibility.** Some activities may need to be implemented with low visibility or no visibility at all to avoid exposing participants to risks.

3 Ibid.

Step 6: Advocate for addressing policies that lead to bias

The funding environment plays a significant role in influencing dynamics around aid bias. It is important to advocate with donors to promote a fair funding environment, by targeting assistance according to inclusive criteria that are based on vulnerability (e.g. homeless persons, single mother, etc.), rather than status or nationality (e.g. refugees, Syrians etc.). NGOs and other implementing agencies can use evidence generated from other programmes and their expertise to sensitise donors on the evolving needs of vulnerable people and the changing context, as well as potential issues around aid bias. They should also advocate for donor collaboration within and across sectors. Where host governments are contributing to aid bias, NGOs and implementing agencies can call on their donors to influence host country institutions to address tensions and ensure inclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guidance note was authored by Ilina Slavova and Ruth Simpson of International Alert. The authors would like to thank the Qudra 2 team and implementing partners for their valuable and insightful contributions. In particular the author would like to thank Kristina Willebrand-Biyik, Martin Linden and Nazlı Karayigit of GIZ, and Beatrice Nicouleaud of Expertise France. Additionally, the author would like to thank Alys Brown, Ghada Rafai, Lama El Awad, and Murad Nassif for their valuable reflections.

Published by
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
under the Qudra 2 – Resilience for refugees, IDPs, returnees and host
communities in response to the protracted Syria and Iraq crises

Authors
Ilina Slavova and Ruth Simpson / International Alert
May 2023

Registered offices
Bonn and Eschborn
Germany

Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 32 + 36
53113 Bonn
Germany
T +49 228 44 60-0
F +49 228 44 60-17 66

Dag-Hammarskjöld-Weg 1 - 5
65760 Eschborn
Germany
T +49 61 96 79-0
F +49 61 96 79-11 15

E info@giz.de
I www.giz.de

Registered at
Local court (Amtsgericht) Bonn, Germany: HRB 18384
Local court (Amtsgericht) Frankfurt am Main, Germany: HRB 12394

VAT no. DE 113891176