The Housing and Land Rights Network of Habitat International Coalition held its first set of workshops, in collaboration with Amel Association, for the “Sanctuary in the City: Beirut” project on 17–19 August 2016. The initial workshops introduced the principles and purposes of universal human rights, contextualizing their implementation in the urban context. In application, HLRN presented the Global Charter for the Right to the City, the Gwangju Principles for Human Rights Cities and the UCLG-CSIPD Charter Agenda on Human Rights in the City as models. The workshop considered these and related instruments to explore the prospect of developing such a charter for Beirut emphasizing the municipal commitment to apply human rights principles in the particular circumstances of the protracted crisis of refugees and displaced persons. The workshop program presented the principle such that, while the refugee crisis is also a global responsibility, that responsibility if discharged by local governments. The program focused on the specific experiences of three cities in different regions as human rights cities (Gwangju and Vienna) and/or applying the “right to the city” (São Paulo). With the case of Lebanon as example, the message emphasized also the human rights obligations of local government under treaty, as well as the role of the international community to shoulder its responsibilities to support local governments. The workshop discussion produced observations of the current situation of refugees’ and displaced persons’ living standards and social cohesion, as well as recommendations on how local governments in Greater Beirut could contribute to improved living standards and promote social cohesion in this context by operationalizing the principle of citizenship in the city that is common to the applicable charters.

The workshops raised a series of observations as a diagnosis of the situation in Lebanon and evaluate the importance of work toward a charter for Beirut as a major human rights city in light of the crisis faced by the situation of refugees in Lebanon. They also served as domestic assessment of the applicability of the right to the city/human rights city principles to Beirut.

The most important take-aways arising from the workshops include:

**Participant Observations:**

- One of the most important urban experiences in the current period is the refugee and displacement crises that challenge both service delivery and governance in cities.
- This experience informs the New Urban Agenda of Habitat III and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and their implementation, although neither global policy instrument addresses the phenomenon sufficiently;
• The refugee crisis is a global responsibility belonging to the international community as a whole, but in operation, framework that responsibility falls to local governments in the provision of basic services and other needs in the exercise of the right to the city and according to the principles of human rights;
• The voices of Beirut should contribute to the global debate and discourse in the role of local governments, especially in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, as well as the global and international responsibility in responding to the refugee crisis and the application of human rights principles locally in accordance with the framework of human rights obligations at the local level;
• There is no unified international concept of the right to the city because it has yet to be discussed in the international legal framework; so there are several different concepts have emerged from the right to the city;
• The right to the city/human rights in the city is the accumulation of all the human rights of inhabitants and the corresponding obligations of the municipality;
• The concept of the right in the city/human rights cities does not obviate the need for fair and equitable development and distribution of investment in the countryside;
• The workshop clarified the human rights of refugees and the other relevant international legal norms and sources, in particular the role and obligations of local governments in protecting and assisting refugees in accordance with the framework and general principles of international law, as well as specific treaties; these include the requirement of nonrefoulement pursuant to the rules of public international law, including human rights, and not only according to the 1951 Convention;
• Governmental institutions play the primary role in providing protection and assistance to refugees, even if Lebanon is not a ratifying party of the 1951 Convention;
• Recognition of the legal status of non-citizens in exercising their civil rights remains a fundamental challenge in applying the concept of the right to the city/human rights in the city/Human rights city;
• Recognizing the legal personality and the fundamental rights of the refugees is an obligation in accordance with the general rules of international law;
• The obstacles facing the refugee community include access to means of redress when basic rights are violated in the country of asylum;
• We need to monitor and assess the practices by state agencies in dealing with the refugee crisis in light of what is stipulated in the international covenants and conventions as an obligation of states to provide basic protection to refugees and displaced persons;
• CSOs have an important role to play to support refugees and displaced persons in realizing their legal personality and accessing means of redress;
• The lack of any rights or regard for Palestinian refugees and displaced persons coming from Syria, including their lack of any legal status, compounds their vulnerability;
• Refugees have a right to voluntary and safe return as a key element of reparations in the case of gross violations leading to their flight, along with property restitution, compensation and rehabilitation; resettlement, guarantees not to repeat the violation (displacement and eviction) and satisfaction, in accordance with the rules of general international law (A/RES/60/147).
Recommendations:

- Local authorities and governments, as well as civil society organizations (CSOs) have an important role to play in ensuring refugees’ and displaced persons’ access to knowledge about the rights of refugees and the responsibility of local governments toward them;
- Basic education and work are among the greatest needs and rights of refugees/displaced persons in Greater Beirut;
- The curfew imposed by some municipalities under municipal law has a negative impact on vulnerable refugees and displaced persons;
- The lack of certain institutions in Lebanon and the region (such as facilities for legal aid, a National Human Rights Institution or the European Court of Human Rights) that processes human rights violations and abuses;
- The Constitutional Council, which monitors the constitutionality of laws, is not challenging procedures and laws that violate constitutional principles;
- UNHCR ensures that all women are also heads of households, but that recognition needs to be uniform across local institutions;
- Municipalities should cease imposing illegal fees on refugees and displaced Syrians;
- Adopting the term “citizen” in accordance with the right-to-the-city/human-rights-city principles and its interpretation would help to change attitudes and help refugees/displaced persons access basic rights;
- Local governments, as the closest official authority to deal with refugee issues, should have access to greater resources for the provision of basic needs and assistance to refugees and displaced persons;
- The principle of the social function of property as related to a right to own property in accordance with the principles of the right to the city, should be developed as one of the most important principles to achieve social justice in land management;
- It is necessary to create a debate between the municipalities and local governments in the region about the importance and role of the social function of property;
- The private sector bears a social responsibility in providing certain kinds of assistance to refugees and displaced persons;
- Local governments could take advantage of the manpower within the refugee community—applying the principles of human rights—for public works in exchange for assistance;
- Recognition of the legal status of non-citizens in exercising their civil rights remains a fundamental challenge to the application of the concept of the right to the city;
- The historical conflict between the Syrian and Lebanese regimes also affects refugees and displaced Syrians in Lebanon, and efforts are needed at reconciliation and conflict resolution;
- It would be important to create protocols between the municipalities on a global level for the exchange of technical and financial expertise and awareness of the issues of basic services to refugees and displaced persons within city jurisdictions;
- The executive bodies of the central government and municipalities need greater capacity to do their respective parts in confronting the refugee crises;
Lebanon should find ways to take advantage of the contributions of refugees with the high qualifications and professions as citizens to raise awareness of the marginalized and vulnerable groups in liaison with other bodies and organizations involved in assisting refugees;

Syrians level of educational curriculum less rigorous than Lebanese. The central government proposal for education in camps differs from Lebanese curriculum, thus making longer-term integration harder.

The workshop with municipal officials was not well attended, so the project was not able to communicate sufficiently with municipal officials to capture their vision, beliefs and challenges they face as the duty bearer within the principles of international human rights law.

Lessons:

In pursuing social cohesion with refugees/displaced persons, some contradictions come to the surface. In particular, some observed that Lebanese have not achieved social cohesion, let alone with the new-coming Syrian and other refugees.

In the case of Lebanon, centralization is only theoretical (شكلية وليس فاعلية), so relevant powers have not devolved to local government.

Refugees replicate social patterns and seek their own means of problem solving; e.g., informal justice.

The scales of rights and responsibilities expected of refugees/displaced persons depend on their longevity in the country: immigrant, refugee (N.B.: Palestinian refugee), displaced person. The less permanent, the fewer the perceived (and actual) rights and responsibilities they assume.

NGOs are essential actors (1/3 of the equation); e.g., al-Zaituna, al-Watan, Amel, Consultancy Commission for Syrian Refugees, Caritas Lebanon Migrants Center, etc.

UNHCR established Refugee outreach volunteers (ROVs). The ROVs are Syrian refugees that usually live in the harder to reach parts of Lebanon. They are volunteers who act as a link between the UNHCR and its partners, and refugees who might find it hard to get to major UNHCR centers.

Municipalities have similar functions, but local authorities differ politically.

Syrians work harder/longer than Lebanese (e.g., 15 hrs. v. 10 hrs.).

Syrians double-up in housing, while Lebanese do not, but both endure inflation.

Refugees provide labor for infrastructure projects in municipalities and villages (with Ministry of Public Works).

Municipalities generally do not have much direct contact with refugees/displaced persons in their jurisdiction. In an exceptional case, Norwegian Refugee Council negotiated to convince the mayor of Choueifat to dedicate one hour of his time for consultation with refugees/displaced from Syria.
Remaining Questions:

- How do municipalities respond to « rights of cities »?
- Beirut has avoided major conflict, despite the plurality of political and other divisions. How do Beirut municipalities avoid conflict? UNHCR hired a consultant in mediation. Did s/he consult with municipalities?

Adjustments for the next period:

In addition to the consultations and small group discussions of the constituencies, the project will need a wider pool of respondents to the questions about livelihood conditions and social cohesion. In order to cover the greatest number of possible respondents, HLRN will draft online questionnaires for each constituency, in consultation with Amel Association.

The original project design did not call for the involvement of CSOs until later stages. However, the role of CSOs as intermediaries with municipalities, service deliverers and their potential in conveying the right-to-the-city/human-rights-city principles makes it important to include them on an equal basis with the refugees and municipalities.