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ABSTRACT

As the Syrian civil war enters its fifth year, with over four million refugees and no solution in the near future, the international community must better consider long-term planning in regards to the plight of refugees and services to support them, not just short-term emergency responses. Critically, higher education is all too often ignored when addressing refugee crises, pushed aside in favor of primary education, and effectively disempowering those best suited to eventually rebuild and reconstruct after war's end. This paper examines the often less considered aspect of refugee access to higher education, using Duhok, located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as a case study, and hypothesizing that refugees' inclusion in Duhok's local higher education system can serve as an invaluable peacebuilding tool, bridging host and refugee communities, while empowering refugees to promote peacebuilding and development. We chose to focus on higher education because we agree with the idea espoused by Watenpaugh, Fricke, and Siegel that 'university graduates … include Syria's brightest and most ambitious young people … the human capital that will be critical to the rebuilding of Syrian society after the conflict has ended'. This study investigates Duhok area residents' perceptions of the Syrian refugee crisis and the refugee population, refugees' attitudes toward the host community and higher education, and personal views regarding intergroup relationships and the role of higher education, drawing primarily on field research conducted in 2013. Approached as a qualitative study, field research was conducted by a two-person team, with members representing the University of Duhok and New York University, and with the aim of actively working with research participants in the hopes of generating policy-related and practical recommendations.

Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of July 2015, over four million Syrians have fled Syria since the fighting began in 2011 (UNHCR 2015). As the deadly conflict enters a fifth year, it seems that 'no end [is] in sight,' (Daragahi 2014) that the current refugee crisis, described by some as 'the greatest humanitarian tragedy of our times,' (Jamieson 2014) will continue to drag on for years to come. All this necessitates a

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better awareness of how 'the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey has had a profound impact on [the countries'] natural resources, political dynamics, economies, social structures, and traditions of hospitality,' (Brookings 2014) threatening to overwhelm the 'capacity[ies] of host communities and fuel[ing] emerging tensions between refugees and local populations.' (Crisp et al. 2013) The situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), currently home to more than 200,000 Syrian refugees, (http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/region.php?country=103&id=65) is no different, including Duhok Governorate, which hosts the Domiz Refugee Camp (Camp Domiz), the single largest refugee camp in Iraq, (Fayad 2013) where an estimated 55,000 Syrian refugees presently reside (http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/region.php?country=103&id=65).

While 'humanitarian relief is typically about serving immediate, short-term needs,' (West 2014) we argue that 'education … is another integral part of relief, requiring long-term investment,' (ibid.) as well as long-term planning. This paper examines the often less considered aspect of refugee access to higher education, (Zeus 2009) hypothesizing that refugees' inclusion in Duhok's local higher education system can serve as an invaluable peacebuilding tool, bridging host and refugee communities, while 'empowering refugees to become agents of development.' (ibid.) We chose to focus on higher education because we agree with the idea that 'university graduates … include Syria's brightest and most ambitious young people … the human capital that will be critical to the rebuilding of Syrian society after the conflict has ended' (Watenpaugh, Fricke, and Siegel 2013). This study investigates Duhok area residents' perceptions of the Syrian refugee crisis and the refugee population, refugees' attitudes toward the host community and higher education, and personal views regarding intergroup relationships and the role of higher education, drawing primarily on field research conducted in 2013. Approached as a qualitative study, field research was conducted by a two-person team, with members representing the University of Duhok and New York University, and with the aim of actively working with research participants in the hopes of generating policy-related and practical recommendations.

Context

The Syrian crisis seems likely to stand as another example of a protracted refugee situation, wherein refugees have 'been in exile for more than five years' (Loescher and Milner 2012). At this time, approximately two-thirds of all refugee situations globally (ibid.), including more than seven million individuals (ibid.), qualify as protracted refugee situations. Unfortunately, according to education researcher, Barbara Zeus, there is a lack of research focused on refugee education from a long-term view (Zeus 2009), the situation complicated by the lack of any 'particular body of literature on higher education in refugee and emergency situations' (ibid.). While some efforts have focused on distance learning (Jesuit Refugee Service 2011), it 'remains relatively unexplored as a tool for including marginalized learners at higher education levels,' (Zeus 2010) and would, ideally, require courses 'tailored to the specific context so students can actually gain from their learning experience' (Zeus 2010, 66).

Regionally, the Institute of International Education (IIE) has worked to bring attention to the issue of Syrian refugees and higher education in Jordan (Watenpaugh, Fricke, and Siegel 2013) and Lebanon (King 2014). Refugee students faced significant barriers to continuing their studies, including financial constraints (ibid.), difficulties adapting to the host community's language or dialect (ibid.), while often 'lack[ing] documents needed for academic study,

such as certified transcripts and official attestations as to the level of education they have completed' (Watenpaugh, Fricke, and Siegel 2013, 12). The IIE Scholar Rescue Fund and Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis have also worked to provide opportunities for Syrian university students to study abroad (Inside Higher Ed 2013), including a planned 600 scholarships in 2014 (Institute for International Education Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis 2014).

Fearing a 'lost generation,' (Tran 2014) the majority of attention regarding Syrian refugee access to education has focused on primary schooling. The refugee response in Duhok Governorate has mirrored this, with NGOs and international actors, including Save the Children and the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), actively working in the area on these issues with the cooperation of local government education officials (Iraq Business News 2014). One of the more recent successes resulting from this cooperation was the opening of Camp Domiz's first secondary school, the Dereke School, in March 2014 (UNHCR, 2014). While a commendable step, it comes two years after Camp Domiz officially opened (KRI 2012), highlighting the largely short-term focus of relief efforts thus far. Comments from a newly enrolled student at the Dereke School at its opening ceremony expressed the students' shared 'hope to complete [their] study … by the allocation of seats in [the] universities and institutes in the region,' (Iraq Business News 2014) while spotlighting widespread uncertainty over their post-secondary education future. What opportunities the graduates from the Dereke School will have remains an open question. Publicized efforts to integrate Syrian students within the KRI's universities remained limited, with only three students accepted to American University of Iraq – Sulimaniya in 2014 (Barbarani 2014).

In formulating this study, we opted to limit our research to Duhok governorate, which is the temporary home of the majority of Syrian refugees in the KRI (Fayad 2013). Furthermore, the governorate includes both Domiz, the largest Syrian refugee camp in Iraq (ibid.), which is in close proximity to the city of Duhok, as well as the University of Duhok (UoD), one of the largest universities in the KRI (KRI 2014). According to information for 2014 provided on their website, UoD has more than 12,000 students enrolled (UoD Website 2014), of which, according to the UoD Registrar Office, only seven are Syrian refugees (University of Duhok, 2014b). Policies governing higher education in the KRI are regulated by the Ministry for Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) (MoHESR 2014), whereas earlier schooling, including secondary schools, is governed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Invest in Group 2013).

Conceptual framework

Crucially, this study rejects the traditional binary understanding of peace and war, instead viewing 'peacefulness along a continuum rather than simply as the absence of violence'(Mahmoud, Makoond, and Yassien 2012, 12). This echoes the work of Johan Galtung, who defined negative peace as simply the absence of direct violence, while advancing the idea of structural violence as any constraints or limitations on human potential caused by economic, political factors, or cultural factors, which includes structural issues such as racism and sexism, which unfairly inhibit human beings (Galtung 1969). Whereas, positive peace is defined as 'the presence of the structures, institutions, and attitudes that guarantee a sustainable social system and the freedom from all forms of violence,' (Hagerty 2014) including structural violence.

In that light, peacebuilding is seen as, in the words of John Paul Lederach, a 'comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable peaceful relationships' (Lederach 1997, 21). In essence, peacebuilding is conceived as a process of positive and sustainable change, of improving inter-communal relationships and understandings. Peacebuilding also works to move beyond simply ending direct violence, i.e. achieving negative peace, but to address and resolve issues of structural violence while working towards positive peace. Essentially, peacebuilding argues that it is not enough that two different identity groups might live next to each other with no direct violence, but that only through sustained, positive, and fair relationships and interactions, can positive peace be attained.

Education can be a key part of this process and, according to a report commissioned by UNICEF, 'education is not a marginal player in peacebuilding, but a core component of building sustainable peace' (Noveli and Smith 2011, 7). Education also plays a pivotal role in 'socialization and identity formation, is vital for economic growth and individual and national advancement, and can act as an important vehicle for social cohesion and reconciliation' (ibid., 37). Social cohesion, 'a societal, not an individual, phenomenon that includes the level of trust and understanding of shared principles among groups in a society,' (Roberts-Schweitzer 2006, 1) can be considered a reflection of social capital, 'the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's social networks' (Woolcock 1998, 153). Social cohesion can also be considered particularly important to peacefulness, as it reveals a degree of bridging social capital, which links together different identity groups and has been correlated with economic growth (Putnam 1993, 175–176). Conversely, violence has been found to be more likely when strong bonds within identity groups, known as bonding social capital, precludes bridging social capital (Mahmoud, Makoond, and Yassien 2012, 48).

Bridging capital also corresponds with the peacebuilding concept of connectors and dividers, elements in a conflict context that increase cooperation and understanding or that spur tension and division (Anderson 1990, 23–25). Connectors are dynamic and, according to the Do No Harm framework developed by Mary Anderson and the Collaborative for Development Action, 'today's dividers may be tomorrow's connectors' (ibid., 26). Education can serve as both connector, 'improve[ing] understanding among people, reduc[ing] internal and external violence, and enhance[ing] the society's ability to reduce poverty,' as well as divider, 'foster[ing] ethnic, economic, and other tensions' (Roberts-Schweitzer 2006, 2).

Higher education can also serve to help empower refugees themselves. According to education scholar Barbara Zeus, 'refugees [are] primarily regarded as victims in the international system of refugee relief' (Zeus 2010, 37). Refugees are typically not permitted 'to become self-reliant, contribute to, and have a positive impact upon their own and their host communities' development' (ibid., 77). In essence, this paper argues that by empowering refugees through access to higher education, they and the bonds they form with members of the host communities, can serve as local capacities for peace, the 'individuals and institutions whose task it is to maintain intergroup peace' (CDA Collaborative Learning Projects 2004, 3), working to move beyond the mere absence of direct violence and toward the more positive and mutually beneficial relationships of positive peace. Such an approach would echo a key tenet of the Do No Harm framework, that 'assistance, whether relief or development, always becomes a part of the context in which it is given,' (ibid., 7) that such programming can never simply remain neutral, and that programming decisions and structures can be designed to increase peaceful relationships and intergroup understanding.

Previous research, including a conflict assessment conducted by one of the authors, has noted the low level of integration and understanding between refugees and the local host communities (Munoz 2013), with other observers commenting on issues of labor exploitation and discrimination (Ahmed 2014). This reflects a reoccurring concern in refugee crises, that 'the presence of refugees can create tensions and conflicts with host communities for a number of reasons' (Walton 2012, 2). A report commissioned by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), found that, although 'the literature on good practice in [preventing conflict between refugees and host communities] is patchy … one of the main barriers to effective programming has been donors' tendency to separate humanitarian assistance for refugees from broader development assistance' (Walton 2012). This observation matches one of the conclusions of the previously mentioned conflict assessment, that refugee assistance programs have been too narrowly focused, eschewing a broader perspective.

To that end, this research paper incorporates systems thinking, which 'requires people to see the interconnections between distinct elements of a system, to see causality in dynamic rather than linear terms … [to] assume that no initial condition exists in isolation; rather each is part of an interconnected system' (Ricigliano 2012, 33). Sustainable social change and peacebuilding efforts 'cannot be successful if they focus only on changing a discrete part, or several discrete parts, with no recognition of the dynamic system that these individual pieces comprise' (ibid., 26). Instead, systems thinking stresses that any analysis 'step[s] back far enough to see patterns or wholes,' (ibid., 26) or, in the case of this research, examines not just the refugee community or the host community as distinct elements, but as inter-connected and inter-related parts of a wider whole. Addressing both communities and their interconnections, according to DFID's report, allows an approach whereby 'facilitating the participation of both host and refugee communities, program[s] can improve social relationships and, in doing so, reduce tensions,' (Walton 2012, 5) functioning as a more sustainable and comprehensive style of peacebuilding.

Methodology

We approached the field research with the concepts of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in mind, wherein 'researchers and social actors join forces in collective research and analysis [with] social actors contribut[ing] their knowledge of the issues … [while] researchers help to systematize this knowledge … and [lead] the collective analysis exercise' (Stiefel 2001, 272). Integral to PAR is the idea that 'if researchers and social actors work together as a team in a collective effort of research and analysis, the results obtained are better and reflect reality more effectively, because the participants bring to the research exclusive knowledge and understanding that would not otherwise be available.' This spirit of partnership is also echoed in the choice to prioritize data generation, where 'the researcher is often regarded as a co-producer of the data, which are produced as a result of an interaction between researcher and [research participants],' (Byrne 2004, 181) instead of traditional ideas of data collection, which typically sees outside researchers gathering data without substantive thought towards collaboration.

In designing our qualitative study, we relied on the concept of 'purposeful selection … [a] strategy [where] particular settings, person, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to … questions and goals' (Maxwell 2013, 98).

Purposeful selection allows researchers to 'achieve representativeness … of the settings, individuals, or activities' (ibid., 99) examined. In this case, purposeful selection allowed us to draw on the perspectives of both Syrian refugees and members of the host community of Duhok, while also ensuring that the views of relevant NGOs, university officials, and others, were also considered. This process also enabled us to help control for our own biases, in support of increasing peacefulness and positive relationships between the refugees and host community, ensuring that the voices of those skeptical of such ideas were also heard and included.

Relying upon convenience sampling, we opted to use a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups. In-depth interviews enable researchers to guide discussions while 'simultaneously leading the way with well-prepared, thought-through questions, and following the interviewee through active, reflective listening' (Hoglund and Öberg 2011, 130). An interview guide was utilized to ensure that conversation themes remained relevant to Syrian access to higher education and its effects on perceptions of peaceful coexistence, ensuring that discussions began from the same starting point. We also considered the semi-structured quality where 'each in-depth interview will take different twists and turns and follow its own winding path' (ibid.,130) to be particularly useful in ensuring that we allowed ample room for interviewees to express their own viewpoints and ideas, ensuring that they remained participants in the research process.

Including focus groups, 'a research technique that collects data through group interaction,' (ibid., 146) allowed us to better examine 'the political and social context in which the research [was] carried out,' (ibid., 146) a particularly useful aspect as we expected diverging opinions, especially from members of the Duhok host community, in regards to the Syrian refugees' access to higher education. Ensuring a degree of group interaction enabled participants the opportunity to develop 'and redefine[e] their opinions during the discussion,' (ibid., 147) an especially relevant quality when 'the topic is such that it requires new reflection because it is not a question participants pose to themselves every day' (ibid.). As a result, we were better able to capture moments of disagreement among participants, able to directly witness how diverging narratives and perspective interacted and competed in a way that would have been impossible had we relied solely on interviews.

Informed consent was established with all participants and we remained open and transparent in terms of our university affiliations, backgrounds, as well as our intention to share and disseminate our findings, in accordance with the principles of PAR (Community Forestry & Environmental Research Partnerships 2014).

Presentation of data

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews have been coded, both in order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, as well as to assist in analysis. The data generated was examined for 'themes, variables, and subcategories,' (Lawson 2012), following which, 'interconnections were made between themes … form[ing] a story of the connections' (ibid.). Analysis was approached as an ongoing and reflective process and, in keeping with PAR, participants were periodically involved with evaluating data as it was generated.

Research participants' comments are listed by reference codes, summarized in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants by type and reference code.

Type	Total	Reference code
Syrian refugees – Interviews	21	SR-I + (1–21)
Syrian refugees – Focus groups	4	SR-FG + (4)
University of Duhok – Focus groups	4	UoD-FG + (1–4)
KRG/NGOs/UN/UoD – Interviews	8	G-I + (1–8)

Syrian refugee participants overall voiced enthusiastic support for continuing their studies in the KRI, (SR-FG 1-4, SR-I 1-21, SR-FG 1-4) displaying a wide degree of different academic accomplishments ranging from those now completing their 12th grade at the Dereke School to some who had completed masters degrees and hoped to pursue a PhD (SR-FG1, SR-FG2). However, numerous refugees felt discouraged, lost in the system, and unsure how to go about enrolling in a local university (SR-I2, SR-I5, SR-I6, SR-I9, SR-I11, SR-I13, SR-FG1-4). By and large, the greatest difficulty mentioned by refugees was that many lack their official transcripts or other documentation attesting to their coursework in Syria, as required by the MHESR (SR-I2, SR-I3, SR-I4, SR-I5, SR-I7, SR-I8, SR-I9, SR-I10, SR-I11, SR-I12, SR-I13, SR-I14, SR-FG 1-3). Some pointed out the inherent difficulties in returning to Syria to seek this required paperwork and that the security situation there prevented them from doing so (SR-I 2, SR-I7, SR-FG 1-3). Others voiced the opinion that even when they had copies of their official paperwork, that they felt blocked by officials (SR-I6, SR-I9). One participant even stated that a university official he had approached informed him that his paperwork was worthless and that he might as well mix it with water and drink it (SR-I9). Whereas another refugee was told by a different university official that he was better served by going home to paint the walls of his apartment rather than spend time pursuing his studies (SR-I6, SR-I9).

Refugees also worried that if they were allowed to resume or begin higher education studies in the KRI that they would have issues with the language (SR-I1, SR-I2, SR-I3, SR-I4, SR-I8, SR-I11, SR-FG1, SR-FG2, SR-FG3). However, this would be a lesser concern for those in Duhok, as it shares the same Kurdish dialect, Northern Kurmanji, as the predominantly Kurdish area of Syria (Kurdish Academy of Language 2008). Participants did worry, though, that their different accent would require tutoring (SR-I1, SR-I2, SR-I3, SR-I4, SR-I8, SR-I11), but this was viewed as a mere difficulty, not an insurmountable obstacle (SR-I1, SR-I5, SR-I6, SR-I8, SR-I9, SR-I10, SR-I11, SR-I12). Regardless, some refugees would still face linguistic difficulties as the Syrian government had banned formal Kurdish language instruction (Human Rights Watch 2014). Although some refugees also worried about the difficulty of adapting to a different KRI curriculum (SR-I5, SR-I13, SR-I14. SR-FG-1, SR-FG2), while others feared that tensions with the host community would undermine their ability to integrate into KRI universities (SR-I1, SR-I2, SR-I9, SR-I14. SR-FG2, SR-FG3), with a small minority going as far as saying that establishing a separate refugee-focused university would be better (SR-I5, SR-FG3).

We also contacted the seven Syrian refugees who had successfully enrolled at UoD. Those with whom we spoke offered a mix of experiences, some having fled to Iraq after an earlier uprising in 2004 (SR-I19). One clearly articulated that he had utilized political party connections in order to gain access to the university (SR-I16), whereas another admitted he had been intending on going to the KRI prior to the civil war in Syria and had prepared his paperwork beforehand (SR-I17). While several also expressed confusion over the process of applying to the university (SR-I18, SR-I19, SR-I20), one participant revealed that he had

applied first through the UoD Presidency and then worked with the assistance of his academic department to finally acquire paperwork for the MHESR (SR-I20). While successful, his approach was at odds with how most participants understood the process of enrollment and who, instead, first began their attempts at registering by speaking with MHESR officials (SR-I2, SR-I6, SR-I21. SR-FG1, SR-FG2, SR-FG3).

UoD students expressed diverging opinions towards the refugees, with some bluntly stating that 'they don't want to communicate' with the refugees (UoD-FG1), who they saw as increasing crime (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2), spreading diseases (UoD-FG1), taking local jobs (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2), and pushing their own children into begging (UoD-FG2). Others argued that the refugees should have greater restrictions on their freedom of movement, including limited hours to leave the camp (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3), while opining that the refugees were actually more Syrian than Kurdish (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2), asserting that 'they don't have the spirit of Kurdish nationalism,' (UoD-FG2) and possessed a different culture (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3). For some of these students, the idea of allowing the refugees their own segregated university education was the most acceptable option (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2).

These views were in contrast to some student participants who remarked that integrating Syrian students would increase diversity, generating new ideas (UoD-FG3, Uod-FG4), and that by at least accepting the best Syrian students at local universities, that the KRI could benefit (UoD-FG2). For this group, tensions with the Syrians were less compelling than humanitarian concerns over the refugee crisis (UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3, UoD-FG4), a sense of Kurdish kinship (UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3, UoD-FG4), and feelings that they, as Iraqi Kurds, shared a connection because of their former status as refugees (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3, UoD-FG4). For these participants, Syrian access to higher education was agreed to be a means toward increasing understanding and peacebuilding (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3, UoD-FG4),while acknowledging that there would be initial misunderstandings because of cultural and other differences (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3, UoD-FG4).

We also conducted interviews with a variety of NGO representatives, UoD officials, and government administrators relevant to education and refugee policies. Despite their different organizational backgrounds, they were unanimous in their view of the importance of higher education and that there is no long-range plan concerning refugees and access to higher education (G-I 1-8). All participants also agreed that integrating Syrian refugees into existing university programs would be the best path forward, both in terms of building peaceful relations between the communities and making use of existing resources (G-I 1-8). However, participants were split regarding who should be responsible for designing and implementing refugee higher education policy, with some placing the burden on the MHESR, others on local universities, while some highlighted the need for international assistance, whether from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or UNHCR (G-I 1-8). Several participants highlighted the lack of official academic paperwork among the refugees as a pivotal issue, one best addressed by the MHESR or international organizations (G-I2, G-I3, G-I5, G-I8). Whereas, another participant was blunt in stating that higher education for refugees was 'a gap' that no one was adequately studying or addressing, while urging that more related information be collected (G-I7).

Data analysis

Theme: Information Deficits and Little Coordination ('We don't even know where to start the process'). (SR-I1)

The lack of information or coherent response regarding refugee access to higher education became clear from multiple interviews. Refugees regularly expressed frustration with the lack of answers, often alluding to hearing nothing more than rumors regarding applying to universities (SR-I1, SR-I3, SR-I6, SR-I8, SR-I9). Additionally, NGO and other officials were unclear on which parties should take a stronger and leading role in addressing the issue, with each official feeling that a higher level or a different actor should take the lead in planning relevant policy (G-I1-8). In essence, there is a clear deficit of vertical social capital, the 'relationships and linkages between a controlling state and the society it controls' (Mahmoud, Makoond, and Yassien 2012, 47). Whereas, 'social cohesion and peacefulness are more likely to occur where there is horizontal bridging capital and strong vertical capital,' (ibid., 64) arguing for KRI and other policies that build better linkages between the governing bodies – camp officials, UNHCR, the KRG – and those refugees governed.

In reaction to this research project and reflecting upon some of the information gaps highlighted, one local NGO responded by conducting a recent survey of Camp Domiz residents whose higher education studies were interrupted by the Syrian conflict, identifying approximately 700 such individuals (Local NGO 2014). While a commendable response, it also serves to highlight the potential value of stepping back, per systems thinking (Ricigliano 2012, 26), to see the wider context, while also identifying capacities within the broader system. Such an approach would see better communication and coordination between camp officials, NGOs, UN agencies, and university representatives themselves, as well as refugees.

Theme: Refugees and Host Community as Objects, Not Engaged Partners ('No, thank you for listening. I feel like no one listens to us'). (SR-I2)

Incorporating the refugees as actual partners, not simply subjects, in discussions regarding higher education, as well as peaceful coexistence with the host community, necessitates improving vertical social capital connections. Moreover, this participatory approach would help address a common reoccurring issue in protracted refugee situations – long-term dependency (Rosenberg 2011), its own form of structural violence, which deprives those in protracted refugee situations of agency and self-determination. Working with refugees themselves, instead of simply on refugee issues, would help ensure that potential solutions offered by the refugee population – evening classes, locally or internationally sponsored testing and evaluation of students, use of the Syrian Ministry of Education website and its records, distance learning (SR-I1-16, SR-FG 1-4), and other ideas could be fairly considered and assessed.

Similarly, the concerns of the host community are honestly felt and there is clearly, if not a majority among those who participated in our focus groups, a noticeable minority that is opposed to greater cooperation and integration of the Syrian refugees (UoD-FG1, Uod-FG2). While most participants voiced support for bolstering Syrian refugee access to higher education, agreeing that it could build understanding between the communities, concerns were raised over the possibility of initial cultural misunderstandings and that granting access to higher education might entice the Syrians to remain in the KRI (G-I4, G-I5). Syrian participants were also open in admitting that tensions in fact exist with the host community (SR-I1-20,

SR-FG1-4). Clearly, there are dividers – concerns over jobs and competition with Syrians in the labor market, worries over cultural and gender norms, and misgivings regarding the different Kurdish accents (UoD-FG1, UoD-FG2). Some of these concerns were also echoed by both communities in terms of limited university resources available to accommodate additional refugee students (UoD-FG2, UoD-FG3, UoD-FG4, SR-I1-20).

> Theme: Narrowly Focused, Without a Systemic Communal Lens ('Through debate we will have better mutual understanding'). (SR-FG2)

Unfortunately, 'the traditional model of refugee assistance largely ignores the local host communit[ies] ... [resulting in] a fundamental inequity between the quality of services available to the two populations … and caus[ing] resentment between the host and refugee populations, leading to violence on a number of occasions' (Konyndyk 2005). All too often, efforts aimed at helping refugees access higher education have focused on them as an exclusive population, separating them and reinforcing divisions with the host communities. In some previous international examples, including in the case of Syrian refugees, scholarship funds have been set up for refugees to escape and study abroad. But, as education scholar Barbara Zeus argues, 'the cost of one student studying abroad could cover the cost of many students studying locally. Refugee communities lose human resources when students leave for overseas studies' (Zeus 2010).

It is not enough to ask, how to assist the Syrian refugees in obtaining higher education. That itself is too limited a question and simply reinforces the tendency of international actors 'to separate humanitarian assistance for refugees from broader development assistance' (Governance and Social Development Resource Centre 2012) The result serves to foster greater divisions between host communities and refugees, adding to long-term tensions and distrust. Instead, a systems thinking view encourages a wider frame of analysis, stepping back to view both communities as integrated parts of a wider and interdependent system. The question to be asked then is: How to bolster local higher education institutions so that Syrian refugees can obtain educational opportunities while building greater connections with the local communities?

Yes, some members of the host community and even some Syrian refugees expressed concern over integrated access to higher education. However, the major of participants voiced support for a shared university, especially when the conversation turned to the discussion of the universities' current lack of resources. Overall, even many of the interviewees skeptical of integration echoed a view expressed in one of the focus groups, that if the university possessed more resources, including more classes, more teachers, bigger buildings, etc., that the refugees would then be welcome (FG-B3).

Recommendations and conclusion

Participants voiced a number of ideas and possible recommendations for actions going forward. While, some, such as dramatically expanding the size of the current University of Duhok, are infeasible, others have been presented below.

Use Current Education Resources More Efficiently – When this paper was written, the University of Duhok was largely vacant after 3 pm, as very few faculties and departments within the UoD system offered evening classes. However, these empty rooms offer an excellent opportunity for expanding educational offerings for both refugees and some members of the host community. Furthermore, as the numerous academic faculties and departments

share some mandatory classes for first year students, including Kurdology and Academic Debate (University of Duhok 2014a), initial evening classes could focus on these common requirements. The summer holidays also offer other opportunities as UoD and other public universities are essentially closed and unused for the season. Online and blended learning classes could also be considered, especially in the context of expanding credentialing opportunities for the host community in addition to refugees.

Clarify Processes and Communication – During our research, it became clear that various actors at different levels were waiting for further guidance – the university from the Ministry, refugee camp officials from international organizations, the refugees from the universities, etc. International actors, both the UN and NGOs can play a useful role working with Ministry and university officials to create and clarify application processes. Additionally, international actors can work with KRG officials to standardize a common approach to Syrian educational documents, including unofficial copies, and work towards creating a possible testing system, especially in light of the fact that the ongoing civil war prevents many from ever returning to obtain their official documentation in Syria.

Plan for the Long-term – While integrating Syrian refugees into the local higher education sector of the KRI will not be without its own difficulties, it will be easier than the alternative – creating a long-term population dependent on government support and unable to help itself because of limited educational opportunities. Again, international actors can assist in this process, helping to raise awareness of the long-term costs of dependency and the comparative economic benefits of broader access to higher education.

Unfortunately, it seems clear that there will be no easy resolution to the Syrian civil war in the near future, meaning that the question of refugee access to higher education and the wider issue of refugee and host community integration will only grow over time. Until now, though, higher education opportunities for Syrian refugees living in the KRI has been a forgotten issue, ignored by local officials, NGOs, and UN representatives. In light of our research, we view this as a tremendous missed opportunity to both better empower Syrian refugees to improve themselves and their communities and to build bridges with the host communities in the KRI.

Disclosure statement

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