RESEARCH REPORT

PUTTING YOUTH IN CHARGE: IMPLEMENTATION REPORT FOR YOUTH COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION PILOT ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

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1866 AUB American University of Beirut الجامعة الأميركية في بيروت

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
معهد عصام فارس للسياسات العامة والشؤون الدولية

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Figure 1. Youth and LASeR Staff during final day of presentations in Tripoli, Lebanon

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Community Mobilization in Crisis (CMIC) project promotes a participatory approach to community challenges based on the agency and drive of citizens of a community through community mobilization education programs, particularly focusing on work with refugee communities in Lebanon. In this project, we tested this framework through a pilot implemented by University of Ottawa, in partnership with a local community actor: Lebanese Association for Scientific Research (LASeR), a non-profit, working closely in education and with refugee communities in Northern Lebanon. Because this project was supported by the research project "School to College Transitions among Vulnerable Youth in Lebanon" at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, the specific theme chosen was educational barriers experienced by secondary and post-secondary students. The pilot engaged thirty-five students from various backgrounds, who participated in community mobilization training, chose a problem they think is relevant to their own educational barriers, design a solution accordingly, and move towards implementation.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AUB	American University of Beirut
CMIC	Community Mobilization in Crisis
GPA	Grade Point Average
IFI	Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
LASeR	Lebanese Association for Scientific Research
SNHU	Southern New Hampshire University
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
YESS	Young Empowered Students in Secondary

INTRODUCTION

Amid the myriad of new challenges emerging out of Lebanon's years of hosting over a million Syrian refugees, one of the most bureaucratically and socially complex is the challenge of ensuring Syrian refugee youth have access to education at all levels. While Lebanon was an early leader in allowing all Syrian children direct access to their public school system at primary and secondary levels, major challenges to school success have persisted, leading to only 1.4% of Syrian youth of secondary-school age in Lebanon enrolled in secondary school (El Ghali, Alameddine, Farah, & Benchiba, 2019). Although about 20% of youth in pre-war Syria were enrolled in higher education (for the most part in free public universities), very few managed to successfully transfer into higher education institutions since becoming refugees. Given the low level of completion rates of secondary school, this means that younger generations of refugees are also losing out on being able to continue into post-secondary education.

While the particular dynamics of this situation in Lebanon are influenced by the size of the refugee population, the pre-existing relationships between Syrians and Lebanese, and the structures of the Lebanese and Syrian education systems, are a broader reflection of the challenges facing refugee students globally, particularly when enrolling in higher education. Non-governmental organizations, universities, governments, and foundations have put significant resources into developing programs, including scholarships, preparatory programs, and online learning opportunities, which serve refugees displaced by the Syrian crisis, particularly those located in countries of first reception, like Lebanon. Despite the investment in these areas, both secondary school completion and post-secondary enrollment remain low. Therefore, a thorough examination of the barriers refugee youth face in enrolling in post-secondary education, as well as their circumstances in secondary school, can help ensure a good fit between policies and interventions, and the actual needs of refugee youth.

This report is based on a collaboration between the Community Mobilization in Crisis (CMIC) project, a research/teaching project headquartered at the University of Ottawa, Canada, with partners in Lebanon, Palestine, Kurdistan region of Iraq, Brazil, and the Lebanese Association for Scientific Research (LASeR), a non-governmental organization located in Tripoli, Lebanon, which supports refugee and host-community youth in succeeding in secondary school, and enrolling in post-secondary education, particularly in the north of Lebanon. This collaboration includes a nine-session pilot program, jointly developed and delivered by CMIC and LASeR staff, working with secondary and post-secondary students to use community mobilization techniques to develop mobilizations that would help address the barriers they have faced, or are facing, in their educational careers, as well as further data gathering (detailed in the report below) about the broader context of post-secondary and secondary education for refugee youth in Lebanon today.

This report frames and presents the result of that pilot program, supplemented with additional research, conducted in the context of this project on barriers to Syrian youth in Lebanon, to identify access in post-secondary education. It has two main aims. The first is to document the process of working collaboratively with Syrian refugee-youth in Lebanon during late 2019 and early 2020, which was a time of significant disruption in Lebanon. An exploration of the challenges we faced, and the techniques we used to keep momentum going on projects, may benefit future attempts to address these key issues. The second goal of this report is to demonstrate that youth are capable of identifying, not only the barriers they face, but also possible routes to overcome those barriers. Youth have the ability to take a leadership role in addressing these challenges; they are passionate and committed workers, but need to be allowed to take on that role, and be given support in order to realize the change they envision.

THE LANDSCAPE OF SUPPORT FOR POST-SECONDARY ACCESS IN LEBANON

Access to post-secondary education for refugees has been identified as a challenge globally. Key barriers that have been recognized globally include difficulty affording the direct costs of education, cost of education versus work; a lack of documentation, either as refugees or of their prior education; extended time out of school; and discrimination.[1] Because of these challenges, a variety of programs have been developed and tested worldwide to attempt to bridge these gaps. These programs build on the long histories of programs that try to facilitate success at university, and other post-secondary programs for students with a wide variety of barriers to access. In other words, we already know many things about how to help students who are first-generation university attendees, who come from low-income backgrounds, are racial, ethnic, religious, or national minorities, or have studied at lower-quality secondary schools achieving success in post-secondary education; the question is, rather, what particular insights from this field are best-positioned to support refugee and displaced students, particularly those located in host countries rather than resettlement countries?

Analysis of existing programs worldwide is preliminary, but there has been some movement in this area, particularly spurred on by the obvious connection between universities as implementers of these programs, and universities as research-creating bodies. To date, the broadest framework used to analyze these programs is one developed by Gladwell et al. (2016), a detailed landscape review of all global programs in this field. In their analysis, they develop a five-fold typology of higher-education programs for refugees in low-resource environments: refugee and host community-specific programs that are physically present among affected populations; host-country scholarship programs that support refugee learners to gain access to local universities; international scholarship programs that support refugee learners to migrate, temporarily or permanently, in order to study in third countries; e-learning platforms that provide programs directly to refugee learners wherever they are; and information sharing platforms that try to ensure that refugee learners in different contexts can understand the breadth of possibilities for their continued learning (Gladwell et al., 2016, p.4)

Just over half of all programs examined were either host community or international scholarship programs; approximately a quarter were programs that are physically present with refugee learners, 17% were online learning platforms, and 9% were information portals (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 3). Each of these different modalities has particular strengths and weaknesses, which impact the way in which they can help students, for example, “the programmes in Modality A [physically present programmes] can only assist a limited number of students but can offer a high degree of support, whereas the programmes in Modality D [all-online programmes] have the potential to assist a theoretically unlimited number of students, but can only offer a limited degree of support.” (Gladwell et al., 2016, p. 55). In addition, each type of program seeks to overcome certain kinds of barriers: scholarships overcome the financial barriers to study, whereas targeted physically-present programs overcome barriers related to student support and the relevance of study, and online programs overcome time and logistical barriers to study, as well as cost-related barriers. Therefore, it is important to understand to what extent the particular barriers being overcome through a given program match the most important barriers faced by students in a given context.

Absent from the framework presented by Gladwell et al. (2016) are what might be called “pipeline” programs, which aim to increase the number of secondary-school students, who are capable of enrolling in higher education. While some online and offline refugee-specific programs can adapt

[1] For a variety of overviews on issues related to post-secondary education for refugees, see Further Readings, at the end of this report.

their admissions requirements to help students with documentation or certification issues, a major problem identified by actors in the field, such as LASeR, is the challenge of secondary-school completion for refugee learners. Often, financial necessity leads adolescent youth to work or marriage, rather than continued education; at other times, refugee learners need additional financial, educational, or emotional support to succeed in secondary education. (El-Ghali et al., 2019 p.19-22). Because these programs focus on success in secondary school, they are often not included as a modality of support for success in higher education. However, they are a necessary prerequisite for enrollment, and a strong secondary school preparation is key to success in higher education, suggesting that attention should equally be paid to those programs in understanding how students overcome barriers to post-secondary enrollment and success.

Lebanon has been hosting Syrian refugees since 2011, and has permitted refugee youth access to the public education system through high school. In addition, Lebanon has a well-developed higher education system, including public university, the Lebanese University, serving over 80,000 students, as well as thirty-six private universities and nine university institutes and colleges serving thousands of others. Because of this intersection of high numbers of refugees over a sustained period of time, basic access to secondary education, and the presence of higher education, Lebanon is likely to have a larger number of programs designed to support access to higher education for refugees than countries of first reception, which have weaker higher education systems, or segregate refugees out from secondary education.

In our research for this project[2] ,we identified a total of twenty-five different interventions, organized by universities, local and international NGOs, and the United Nations system, which provide necessary support to refugees seeking higher education. Fifty-two percent of these programs are scholarships, which either assist students in paying for education within Lebanon, or in leaving Lebanon to study abroad. Another 20% are online learning programs at the post-secondary level, including bachelor's and graduate degrees. A combined 20% help students complete secondary school, or bridge to higher education, and a final 8% provide alternative or additional support to post-secondary education. Some programs combine modalities, such as scholarship programs that assist with bridging or support during the post-secondary period. In general, this distribution reflects the global distribution of programs for refugees.

In addition, we conducted a small-scale survey with secondary and post-secondary students connected to LASeR, to determine what their challenges were overall. Among the secondary school students, 14 students (54%) said English was their primary concern. Eight (31%) said that the difficulty of the curriculum was their biggest challenge, while two (8%) said it was lack of financial support. Among university students, two mentioned lack of funding (29%), one said English (14%), one said unfamiliarity with majors (14%), and three selected "Other." We also asked students about what support they had received to date. Four of the university students (57%) received either academic or language support from their university, which suggests that at least some universities are being proactive in providing support to refugee learners. Nine of the secondary school students (35%) received language support, two (8%) received academic support, four (15%) received either psychological or self-improvement support, and four (15%) reported attending workshops. In most cases, LASeR was identified as the provider of the services. These challenges map onto some of the major barriers identified in the literature, while illuminating the Lebanese experience.

METHODOLOGY

CMIC is a research/teaching project that combines a desire to expand access to post-secondary education for refugee learners in Lebanon with a desire to pivot community and international development towards community-centered models that put people in charge of their own solutions. Our research methods are grounded in the participatory action research tradition, which "prioritizes working alongside marginalized and ordinary people and communities to build knowledge, working from the assumption that ordinary people, provided with tools and opportunities, are capable of critical reflection and analysis." (Maguire, 2014). The pilot carried out during this project is one in a series of pilots and workshops in Lebanon, Kurdistan region of Iraq, Brazil, Canada, and the US; we are also currently building towards a credit-bearing certificate program

[2] For greater detail, please see Regan Wills and Richani 2019, "Scoping Report."

at the undergraduate level to be offered in Lebanon.

The generic procedure for CMIC's pilots begins with partnership-building with local organizations that have strong relationships with communities, in this case LASeR. Once that partnership is built, the CMIC team orients the local organization towards our approach and materials, and asks them what their material, curricular, and practical needs are for running the

pilot, and provides as much support as possible, including financial support (in this case, through the IFI grant). The plan for the pilot is adjusted, based on the experience of the partner organization, the facilitators, and the participants. Once the logistics have been managed, the pilot begins; in some cases the CMIC team facilities personally, while in other cases the partner acts independently. For this pilot, CMIC staff was involved for the first three sessions, and then the LASeR staff continued refining the curriculum as necessary. After the pilot had concluded, follow-up support for projects is organized to the extent feasible. CMIC and the partner organization then reflect upon the outcomes of the project, and plan for future collaborations. In this case, CMIC and LASeR are building towards future opportunities for research into community mobilization in Tripoli, and possible collaboration with additional educational opportunities for refugees, and other marginalized communities in Lebanon.

GOALS OF THE PILOT PROGRAM

With numerous programs being designed by experts in development, CMIC is a different approach to communal problem solving. We believe that actors and stakeholders of a certain community are the ones who possess the key to the solution. With their insights being taken into consideration, and their energy to design and implement solutions, we make sure that projects are owned by the people. As the name suggests, the project aims to mobilize the community to design and own projects. We gave agency to the youth to do the following:

- Co-create the curriculum:
    - The design and the content of the training sessions were reviewed and edited before the launch of the program, with local implementers of the project, who were in direct contact with young refugees, and most aware of their needs. The content was then reviewed and changed upon the request of participants themselves, and adapted promptly, according to their feedback from one session to the next. This moves away from what Freire (2005) would call a 'banking' model of learning, where teachers already know what students need to learn and simply impart that information into students, focusing on identifying what students already know and what their learning priorities are.
- Identifying the problems that the youth find most relevant:
    - The program allowed students to identify the most relevant issues in access to education, and then work on it. Being the person who is going through the problem and the one who is supposed to solve it as well, made students choose what seemed the most relevant and pressing for them as direct beneficiaries.
- Designing their own initiatives:
    - Students, for the first time in their teenage life, were given the opportunity to be proactive and responsible for a project from beginning to end. At school, students are always treated as recipients; at home, they are always treated as children or mischievous teenagers; society sees them as refugees, outsiders, and an additional burden in a failing economy. This program offered a tremendous shift in power, moving them, for the first time, to a position of power and responsibility, and giving them the tools to actually make change.

- Having ownership over the proposed solutions:
    - Students were running their own projects, rather than working on behalf of LASeR, the University of Ottawa, or any other organization. By putting them in charge, the students are empowered, and develop their own capacities, laying the groundwork for their own future mobilizations.

PARTICIPANTS

- Our pilot was carried out in Tripoli, a vulnerable city in the North of Lebanon (Al Jazeera, 2020), and considered to be the poorest on the Mediterranean coast. Tripoli's population has stretched by 17% since the arrival of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Khaled, Wilson, & Cohen-Fournier, 2017), but has been targeted by fewer interventions than the Bekaa region or nearby Akkar. We specifically focused on refugee youth currently enrolled in secondary studies, university studies, and those who are pausing for one reason or another between high school and university. Our goal was to recruit 30 students, with a fair distribution between different factors:
- Living inside the city or in the suburbs.
- Gender representation.
- Participation from high school students and university students.

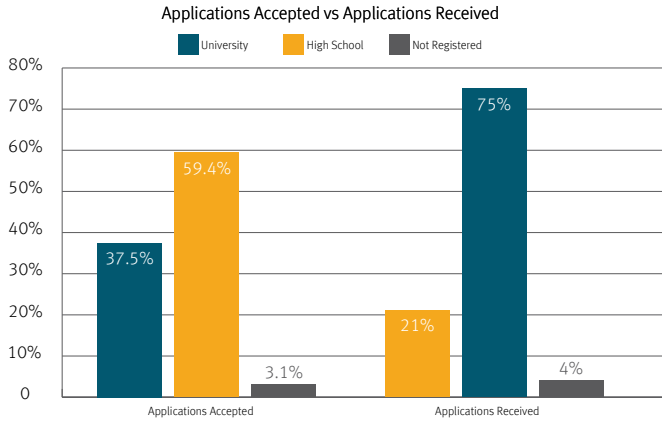
Having worked previously with refugees on numerous projects, LASeR is a trusted center for students, and a place where they can easily work. Through a previous project, Young Empowered Students in Secondary (YESS), a project to assist students in their secondary education, LASeR had a wide community and database of Syrian students currently enrolled at the secondary or tertiary level. Therefore, LASeR used their contacts to recruit students for participation.

An announcement was made to disseminate the information about the CMIC training, and students could apply to the program by filling an online form. LASeR reached out to its database of students, who themselves were ambassadors of the program and had worked as community mobilizers, spreading the word to their peers and their connections. WhatsApp played a major role in reaching out to students, as it's a very easy platform to share information and spread it across the widest population range; a cheap, easily technology accessible to all refugees in Lebanon.

The program received 150 applications through Google Form. Thirty-five participants were chosen according to the following criteria:

- Address: The launch of the pilot coincided with the October 17, 2019, uprising that resulted in roadblocks and difficulties moving from one place to another (Al Jazeera, 2019). To make it easier to implement the pilot, we made sure participants lived in Tripoli and its surroundings, to easily reach our workshop's location.
- Experience in volunteering: If they have any previous experience in community work.
- Commitment: Their commitment to previous programs in LASeR and the LASeR staff's prior experiences with them.

Figure 2. Educational Level of Applicants



The figure above specifies the educational level of the applicants.Of the thirty-five students, 25 were female and ten were male, and the median age was 17. Twenty-six participants were in secondary school (23 in public schools, 3 in private schools), seven attended university (six private, one public), and two attended neither.

Figure 3. Gender Distribution of Participants

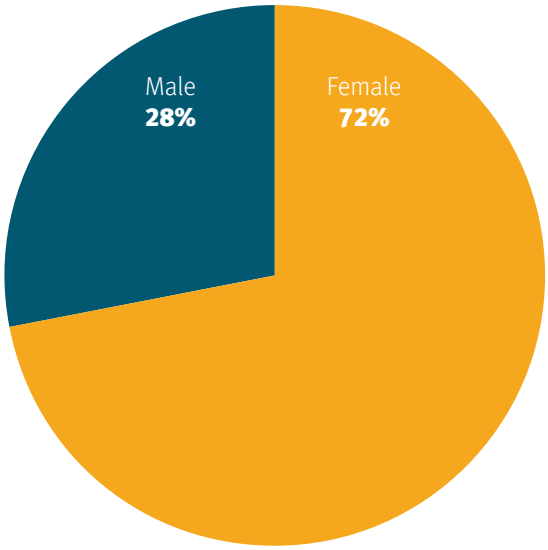
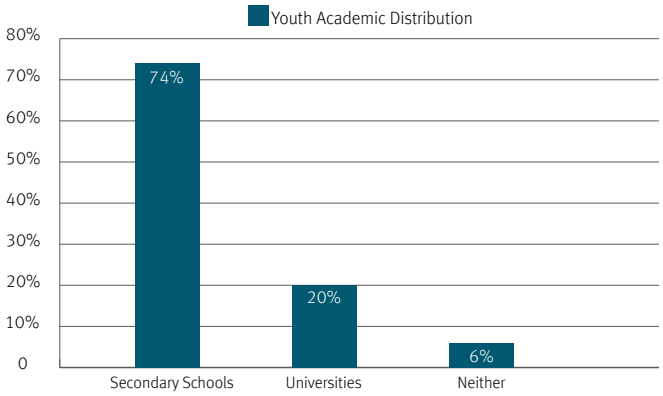


Figure 4. Educational Level of Participants



PILOT IMPLEMENTATION

Before the official launch of the training component, the LASeR staff carrying out the training sessions attended, 'Training of Trainers', delivered by the CMIC team, to both acquaint the staff and co-design certain content components.

With a curriculum co-designed by LASeR and CMIC, the pilot was originally planned for six sessions, but was extended to nine, at the request of the students. The learning objectives were as follows:

- Community dynamics.
- Research tools and methodologies.
- Design thinking and idea generation.
- Project proposal design and development.

All nine sessions took place at LASeR's premises, and were carried out once a week. Every session was delivered as a full-day interactive workshop, from 9 am to 3 pm. This represented a significant contribution and commitment from the students, who gave the program every Friday (their only day off in the week) for two months to attend the workshops. Food and transportation were provided during this training, to facilitate the students' participation in this pilot. All pilot activities were conducted in Arabic.

CURRICULUM

The curriculum delivered during the course of the program was drawn from CMIC's developed learning objects, with additional materials that CMIC and LASeR had used in prior programs. Although the original curriculum included six sessions, an additional three were added in dialogue with participants. CMIC team members were present for the first three sessions, and took the lead in facilitating content, while LASeR team members facilitated ice-breakers and working sessions; for sessions four through nine, the LASeR team facilitated all activities. The table below shows the content of each session, with blue sessions facilitated by CMIC/LASeR, and LASeR-only sessions in orange.

Figure 5. Curriculum's Content

Session 1	Problem Analysis
Session 2	Relationships
Session 3	Research planning
Session 4	How to do Research
Session 5	Ideation
Session 6	Project proposal
Session 7	Project Proposal 2
Session 8	Power Point
Session 9	Public Speaking and Pitch

Below is a description of the content of each session.

Session 1: Problem analysis

In the first session, students were introduced to the CMIC program, and to the definition and components of our community, identities and allyship, critical thinking, and the basics of project design. Then, the participants discussed their expectations of the program.

Session 2: Relationships

In the second session, the participants identified the meaning of community mobilization, and how to find problems and create practical solutions. They were also introduced to the "power shield" as a technique for discussing their own strengths, types of relationships, concerns, and influences.

Session 3: Research planning.

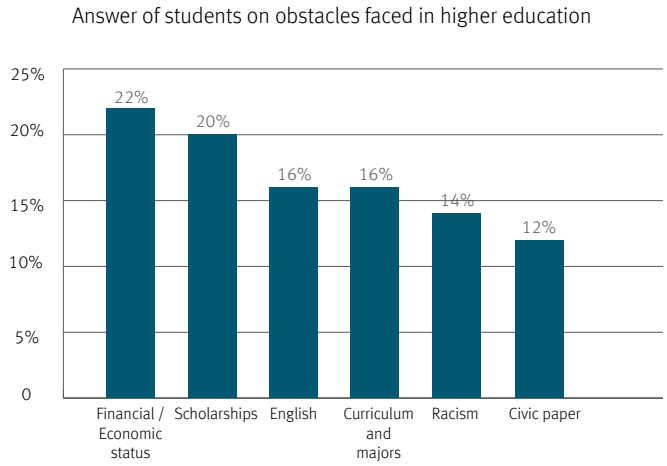
In the third session, the students were shown videos about different approaches to solving shared problems, including the need to think beyond a single project, and how to make choices about whether meeting a given goal needs to be institutionalized, or whether it can be implemented informally.

Figure 6. Picture illusrtating student's answers on educational challenges and possible solutions

Next, the students were engaged in an activity whereby they identified the most relevant problems in accessing higher education. The obstacles were written on sticky notes, hung on the wall (clustered into groups), and read out loud for discussion. The challenges included, but not limited to, the students' financial and economic statuses (22%); the lack of scholarships (20%); weak English proficiency (16%); curriculum difficulty for high school students and majors for post-secondary students (16%); racism (14%); and difficulty in obtaining civil papers and other forms of documentation (12%). After obstacles were identified, a discussion ensued that focused on issues the students found particularly interesting. Highlights of that conversation included:

- Scholarships: Students identified issues regarding the availability of scholarships, knowledge of and ability to meet the selection criteria, lack of choices (scholarships are often limited to certain predetermined majors), the odds of being accepted for a scholarship, being accepted to university, language proficiency, and the availability of funds to cover stipend and transportation, even if a scholarship is obtained.
- English Language: Students always identified English as the main barrier to education access. With a difference in curricula between Lebanon and Syria, students are always shocked to see that the foreign language in Lebanon (English or French) is the medium of instruction, and that a high level of proficiency is needed to succeed at school and university. Students also shared their own successful strategies with each other, to help problem-solve.
- The difficulty of the Lebanese curriculum: The Lebanese education system contains two major exams, the Brevet at the end of ninth grade, which must be passed to continue to secondary education, and the Baccalaureate, which must be passed to continue to tertiary education. Many Syrian students, who successfully pass the Brevet exam, move from an afternoon-shift school, especially for Syrian students, to a blended system, where they attend regular school hours with their Lebanese counterparts. Students find it challenging because of the difficult curriculum, which is designed to fit Lebanese students, in addition to the teachers' fast pace, which often leaves them behind. Challenges in English exacerbate this problem.
- Political situation, and its influence on the country's security: Transportation, curfew, lack of documentation, and the students' status in the country are all factors that threaten their legal existence in Lebanon, on a daily basis. With a government that makes it unbearable for them to reside on its land, Syrians are reminded every day that they are not welcome in this country. With very high fees to renew residencies for example, some families opt to stay in the country without renewing their residency permits. This proves to be a problem, particularly when the children have to sit for an official exam, apply to university, or pass by a checkpoint on their way to school, university, and/or work.
- Social pressure and gender expectations: The pressure to drop out of school, whether for boys to work or girls to marry, is enormous, which is an added stressful factor in their daily life. In addition, coming from a conservative community, young people are not expected to speak about it, or to voice it out, making things for them even harder. Students need safe spaces to express their feelings, and to ask for help.

Figure 7. Chart illustrating the challenges students face at the tertiary level



Following problem identification, the participants formed groups, where each addressed an issue. They were exposed to different models of social action, and then were introduced to the concept of conducting a research study.

Session 4: How to do research

The participants were introduced to various topics, such as identifying the stakeholders, key research ethics guidelines, such as respect, neutrality, confidentiality, and consent, and recognizing and differentiating between the different data types and tools. Students also engaged in a role-playing activity that included conducting interviews and focus group discussions, to better inform them on how to use such tools. The goal was for them to gather information from their communities, to help them better develop ideas about how to address the challenges identified in the prior phase.

Session 5: Ideation

The purpose of this session was to help students brainstorm the highest number of ideas possible by unleashing their creativity and helping them think outside the box, so they can design innovative solutions to problems they have constantly faced. Some of the brainstorming activities used were the following:

- Problem tree scheme: an exercise that allows participants to better identify the problem: its cause(s), and its effect(s).
- "Beautiful wishes": participants will design and write ideal goals and outcomes in an ideal world concerning their specific project, focusing on the best possible outcome, in order to dream big and get as creative as possible.
- "Unrelated fields": this is an exercise about design-thinking, in which participants will link two, usually unrelated, fields, in order to address an issue.

Sessions 6 and 7: "Project proposal"

In these two sessions, students learned how to introduce their projects using the 'elevator pitch' technique. They also practiced gap analysis, the concept of SMART criteria in project management: how to devise work-plan designs, and how to think strategically (e.g. work flow, marketing, seed fund, budget).

Session 8: PowerPoint

Students in this session had to convert their project proposal into a PowerPoint presentation that could be easily understood by the jury on the final-day ceremony. Students had to include:

- The idea.
- The problem they are addressing (based on a problem tree analysis).
- Proposed solution and approach.
- Action plan.
- Outreach and mobilization plan for their community.
- Budget.

- Partners and potential sponsors.
- Sustainability of the project.

Session 9: Public speaking and pitch

The last session served as a training space for students to perfect their presentations, train on the 'elevator pitch' technique, and prepare to present in front of the jury.

PROPOSED INITIATIVES

Six groups of students presented their projects on the final day, all in Arabic. Below are summaries of the projects, with photos from their presentations where possible, highlighting the excellent work done by the students.

Initiative one: peer tutoring "sharing is caring"

Figure 8. Picture illustrating the youth's methodology in implementing their mobilization

Team members: All three youth participants in this group are from secondary public schools in grade 10.

Problem: Difficulty with the grade 10 curriculum, especially in the following subjects: Math, Physics, Chemistry, and English language. This is critical for secondary level, since students drop out from school at this level.

Proposed solution: Because the participants were facing this problem themselves, they thought of different tutoring modalities they personally need to successfully pass grade 10. The team built a project that offers academic support for grade 10 students through peer tutoring by university students, who are refugees themselves. The latter will not only provide academic support for students, but will be an embodiment of what a refugee student can be and achieve in life, a source of inspiration for younger generations.

Initiative Two: Eng Fun "English for Fun"

Figure 9. Picture illustrating the purpose of the project as presented by the youth

Team members: Four out of five members in this group are students enrolled at an online private university, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). SNHU is a nonprofit university dedicated to expanding access to higher education through an online educational program for refugees around the world. This program is implemented in Lebanon, in cooperation with LASeR. The fifth team member is at a secondary level, in Grade 11.

Problem: The language of instruction in Syria is Arabic, whereas in Lebanon, the majority of the courses taught are in a foreign language, which is either French or English. Learning a new language is difficult, especially when the student is required to immediately use it at school. This team of university students decided to address the issue, based on their own personal success stories.

Proposed solution: The participants replicated the 8-month intensive English program they took at SNHU, by designing a similar program. The students' program, Eng Fun, was devised for eight weeks, with interactive workshops and online meet-ups native English speakers to help others become more confident and at ease expressing themselves, within a very short period of time.

Initiative three: "team"

Team members: The eight group members are from public and private secondary schools, grades 10, 11 and 12.

Problem: Students in this group identified a key issue, which is the 'fear of the other'. Syrians experience racism and a sense of superiority from their Lebanese counterparts at school. The coping mechanism Syrian students resort to is self-protection, interacting only with their community, which reinforces the 'fear of the other'.

Proposed solution: To address this problem, Syrian students in this project decided to bridge the gap, and open channels of communication between the two communities. Through volunteering opportunities, both Syrians and Lebanese would be able to forge friendships and build meaningful connections that would eventually dissolve tensions, and lead to more acceptance between the two nationalities. This project proposed a series of four volunteering events (planting new plants in a public area, painting a shelter, cleaning the shores, and distributing parcels of food), where a call for volunteers would be placed in schools for both Lebanese and Syrians to participate.

Initiative four: 'Yalla nehki' (let's talk)

Figure 10. Youth presenting 'Yalla Nehki"'s activities and rationale

Team members: The six group members are female students at a public secondary school in grade 12, first year students at the Lebanese public university, and SNHU students.

Problem: Teenagers suffer from stress, trauma, depression, or any psychological disorder caused by the Syrian crisis.

Proposed solution: Yalla Nehki is an initiative that offers high-school girls a safe space to talk, vent, and express their struggles in a closed session format. They will find peer support, and a listening ear to help them through. (A single-sex group was proposed to allow for greater openness and sharing.)

Initiative five: Hope Initiative Scholarship Platform

Figure 11. Hope Initiative Scholarship Platform presentation

Team members: Two of the three group members are enrolled in a public secondary school in grade 11, and a third is a first-year student at a private university.

Problem: Pursuing a university education is a dream for refugee students in Lebanon because of the high tuition fees and the scholarship criteria, which are based on merit, high GPA, and a strong foreign language proficiency. Moreover, it is difficult to find scholarships that match the students' interests or skills. As such, all the average Syrian students are left without a university education.

Proposed solution: This initiative helps high school students in Tripoli with an average GPA find scholarships. All the opportunities will be placed in a single form, or on a Facebook page. The team members visit high schools on a regular basis to inform the students about the available opportunities. The members then conduct on-site sessions as well to help students complete scholarship applications, and answer any questions.

Initiative six: Life Bond

Figure 12. 'Life Bond' Project Funding Plan

Team members: Five out of six group members are enrolled in secondary schools in grades 11 and 12, while the sixth member is enrolled at SNHU.

Problem: Students suffering from different psychological and economic problems due to the Syrian crisis.

Idea: The aim of this initiative is to create psychosocial support activities to help students feel more confident to address their problems. The idea is to create a movie-club to watch videos and movies for students, and then discuss their personal stories in an indirect approach.

EVALUATION OF PROPOSED PROJECTS

During the ninth session, the youth participants presented their initiatives in front of a jury, which selected three initiatives for seed funding, 500,000 LBP[3] each, with support and mentorship by LASeR for implementation. The members of the jury were Dr. Mustapha Jazzar, the director of LASeR; Saly Khalaf, a project manager focused on technical and vocational education at Chemonics, a development firm; Nidal Ali, the country director of Islamic Relief International in Lebanon, which plays a major role in supplying humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees; Leila Dahdah, an education officer at UNHCR; and Zeina Awaydate, the lead trainer for the CMIC pilot and a staff member at LASeR. Jury members were chosen for their knowledge of the humanitarian and community sector in contemporary Lebanon, and their relationships with LASeR.

The three winning initiatives were Peer Tutoring "Sharing is Caring", Eng Fun, and the Hope Initiative Scholarships Platform. These projects were chosen based on a set of criteria that included the team's readiness to implement the initiative[4], the most innovative solution to the proposed problem, and a high level of local community engagement, those that did the best job engaging the local community. Furthermore, the winning projects addressed significant education barriers, which are English proficiency, difficulty with the Lebanese curriculum, and access to scholarships.

[3] This was equivalent to US$300 at the time of the award, although since then extreme inflation has meant that US dollars have tripled in price vis-a-vis the Lebanese pound.

[4] This criterion was especially for grade 12 students as they were preparing for the national baccalaureate exam.

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The three winning teams began devising the implementation of their projects. The winning teams had several meetings with LASeR staff members, who followed-up on the teams' planning phase, and assisted them in preparing for the implementation phase.

The Peer Tutoring team planned an academic support program tailored for secondary students in grade 10. The duration of the program was four weeks, for a cohort of 15 to 20 students to be tutored twice per week, for four hours each day. The targeted students are both Lebanese and Syrian students, who have a GPA of less than 12/20, and need help in math, science (humanities track), physics, or biology, and who attend the same school as the Peer Tutoring team. The team used their knowledge to select students who they perceived as having good attitudes and behavior, to help the tutoring groups run well. The tutors were chosen from LASeR's student database. They were university students attending public or private universities, have a high GPA, an excellent ability to mentor and teach, and have demonstrated a positive attitude.

Their first session was held on Friday, February 28, 2020, with 20 students and three peer teachers tutoring math, biology, chemistry, and physics. Unfortunately, subsequent sessions were cancelled because of the lockdown. This was the only team that began implementing its idea.

The timeframe of Eng Fun was set to six weeks, with a session per week, lasting two hours. The aim was to have a group of 15 students. The idea and the curriculum's effectiveness were piloted on SNHU students, who were a year behind the Eng Fun team members. This test helped the group identify the project's strengths and weaknesses. When the lockdown began, the team was refining its curriculum.

The team members of the Hope Initiative Scholarships Platform began gathering resources, lists of available scholarships, and categorizing the opportunities according to content, such as by application deadline,

the language(s) required, and the country awarding the scholarship. The target audience was high-school students, with average GPAs, in Tripoli, and the surrounding region. The team intended to reach the highest number of students by reaching out to school coordinators, who would facilitate scheduling short meetings with students. In these meetings, the team would introduce the project's aim, and share with participating students information and reliable sources to finding scholarship opportunities. However, the school visits were postponed because of the country's lockdown.

Before the lockdown began, the participants working on developing the initiatives identified several other areas where they thought further training was necessary:

- Facilitation skills: Acquiring this skill would assist them in facilitating meetings and events; they also asked for specific assistance in facilitating meetings with teenage peers.
- Pitching and public speaking: Sessions on how to pitch their ideas for initiatives, which include a one-on-one component, and would be designed for the participants to feel confident in presenting their project, handling any problem they face during the implementation phase.
- Project management: A session on basic project management skills and concepts needed to implement the initiatives. These competencies and ideas included the concept of a project cycle, tools for developing a project strategy, monitoring and evaluation, and ensuring a project's sustainability.

These training sessions were not offered due to the global pandemic outbreak, COVID-19, which necessitated the country's lockdown.

IMPACT OF THE COUNTRY'S LOCKDOWN

The majority of initiatives were placed on halt after the COVID-19 restrictions, which included shifting in-person school sessions to online, curfews, and limiting the number of people at gatherings. However, some initiatives took advantage of the situation by using social media. For example, an initiative that focused on mental health, the importance of reaching out, and seeking support, wanted to start a movie-club that would engage refugee youth in critical and open conversations about their experiences. Although lockdown hindered the movie-club aspect, the mobilizer of this initiative adapted to the new reality, and utilized social media to continue these conversations. She says:

> *I am still working on this project even from home, and people are thanking me, even though I am young. I am still able to help a few people. I am using a public Instagram page, where I talk about issues that people ask me about. I write the scripts and post videos of me talking. People would privately reach out to me and talk to me about issues having to do with school, mostly. They need someone to talk to, someone their own age, who is experiencing the same things.*

Some of the youth began adapting to the new situation and began thinking of ways to continue their projects with the available resources. One mobilizer said that he "will continue this project without being funded because I can do it without the funding. My perspective changed, I know I can work on even a small project." Others still wanted to continue with their projects but were only in the trial phase when the pandemic hit, and recognized that they needed to do more work and more organization.

FEEDBACK FROM THE YOUTH

A few months after the end of the pilot program, members of the CMIC team reached out to the participants for their feedback on their experience in the program, their recommendations, and suggestions on how to improve the curriculum, which targets youth community mobilizers. Four youths were willing and available to share their experiences; this included both some whose projects received funding, and others whose projects were not funded. Conversations included updates on their initiatives, as well as their perspectives on the pandemic, the financial hardships the country has been facing, and the impact of these events on their outlook on life.

When students were asked to identify the pilot course's major impact on them, almost two identified "gaining confidence" and a "change in perspective." One mobilizer said that she "gained the confidence to speak out and go out and ask," while another mobilizer said that:

> *The course changed my perspective. I had confidence and I wanted to give something back. But when I was thinking about my own process in learning English, it took me a long time to master it with all of the classes and lessons that I had to take, it was such a big problem that even universities were not able to solve. The best thing about this course is that they asked us to be specific when thinking about a problem, to analyze the situation, and to highlight our power to then find a specific aspect to tackle, in order to create the strategy and steps that we can build on.*

By change in perspective, the youth meant that they felt confident in thinking of solutions, and being proactive by taking the initiative to implement it, rather than passively wait for organizations to solve their issues. The change the participants felt was in gaining more trust in themselves to do the work, and to be the instigators of change in their communities, while also acknowledging that they are young and have a lot to learn.

The youth identified a variety of challenges that they faced, including teamwork, the challenges of working in the field, the process of problem identification, and balancing their diverse obligations, in addition to this course. Interestingly, they did not identify the lockdown as a challenge, even though it halted progress on their projects.

The participants faced difficulties working in groups because of different factors. School obligations hindered some group members from engaging and working with others. One youth told us that his group was about to dissolve after a few meetings, but he took the initiative and reached out to the members to continue the work, and provide more structure to the process, helping avoid collapse. He delegated tasks and aimed to work "horizontally," a term taught through the CMIC materials, which distinguishes between vertical power relationships, focused on dictating how others do their work, and horizonal power relationships, focusing on sharing leadership and seeking shared solutions. Another factor was the different educational levels of the students. The capabilities, experiences, and freedom of students at the secondary level differ from those at the tertiary level. It was intentional to have students from different educational levels in the same classroom because those attending university have more experience in guiding their peers, who are still at school; nonetheless, these differences were bound to affect the group's dynamics. To address this issue, a student suggested that the course's participants be divided according to their education level, secondary or tertiary. He further explained, "they [secondary students] were not on the same page, and needed more support due to different capacity and levels."

Some of the projects needed more time in the field to engage with their community because it is difficult to connect with people to gain their support in a short period of time. For example, a discussion with one of the youths, who worked on mental health issues, was about the time it takes for people to feel comfortable to talk about these issues, especially in a context where discussing mental health is a taboo. Students may have had unrealistic expectations about how

much time is needed to build community trust around an issue; it was a process, and they had to learn how to manage their expectations, and put more time and work into steps they thought would be easy.

Almost all of the youth said that they struggled with identifying a specific aspect of a problem, to be able to propose their initiatives. Everyone, naturally, wanted to solve the overarching problems in their communities. The youths wanted to find solutions to financial stress, access to higher education, and psychological issues, among others. However, throughout the course, the participants were able to realize that addressing the bigger problem, without identifying tangible and realistic strategies, is paralyzing. The youth agreed that this process of problem identification, which was detail driven, was difficult but needed to proceed, and to be productive and impactful. The participants said that the support they received from CMIC and LASeR at this stage helped them start their initiatives.

Timing was a factor throughout the process. The course was set to begin in the summer, but due to delays and the protests in 2019, it began during the school year. This meant that participants had less free time, and were juggling the pilot course along with other responsibilities. Most found it difficult to make time to conduct research, talk to community members, and attend the courses while attending school, university, and other obligations. As was mentioned above, the pilot was extended from six sessions to nine; a further extension to allow more time to carry out research, and build in collective processes, would likely have been worthwhile.

Other challenges identified were very natural to the process of initiative-building, which includes trial and error. The progress of one of the teams was hindered when the school they wanted to work with suddenly shut down. Another group faced the challenge of not having their survey circulated amongst their target audience. Other teams required additional support to design their projects' activities.

Because CMIC believes that the most useful curricula for teaching community mobilization are co-created between learners and facilitators, we spoke with participants about their experiences, what was most valuable in the content, and what could be improved upon. The youth reported that, overall, they enjoyed the pilot course and benefited from it. They identified presentation and pitching skills, research methods and ethics, problem analysis, and the overall creative approach to developing solutions as important areas of learning.

The youth also identified two learning areas that they would like to further explore and acquire to strengthen their capabilities and skills. In addition to presentation skills, the youth identified "know more how to talk to people" and learn how to "comfort people when talking about sensitive topics". Secondly, the participants would like more information and skills needed to implement an initiative, such as time management, organizational skills, and cooperation.

OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE CMIC PILOT

Both the CMIC team and LASeR consider the pilot collaboration between them to be a success. At its most basic level, thirty-five youth were exposed to new ideas and practices to develop their own skills as mobilizers; the LASeR staff gained new experience and tools for their continuing work with youth; and CMIC learned even more about the practice of supporting mobilizers from marginalized communities in developing their own solutions. However, in order to increase our learning from the process, we identified key successes of the program as it was carried out, as well as weaknesses and challenges that provide areas for further growth and adaptation.

In terms of successes, the pilot course brought together thirty-five youth in Tripoli to train them in design, and to implement a project in their own community that addresses the barriers in accessing higher education. Through this process, youth from different backgrounds became more connected to each other, and LASeR was also able to expand its outreach to youth, who they might be able to support further. The youth showed interest in the course's content, and were engaged in the process of designing initiatives relevant to their experiences and knowledge, which suggests that the content was relevant, and the topic appealing. All six initiatives were potentially sustainable, with further support and development to address issues in communities. In addition, the process of developing and implementing

these initiatives provided a new opportunity for LASeR to build bridges, and network with similar organizations, in order to facilitate those projects. Finally, the feedback that the youth have provided is an asset for further development.

However, this implementation faced several weaknesses. Having thirty-five students participate at the same time made it difficult to cover the content's specifics, and provide the needed support for each initiative. It required additional staff members from LASeR to be involved in the course. The mix of secondary and university students also seemed to affect group dynamics, especially that the latter felt that the group was not equal in capabilities and skills, due to age difference. University students preferred less structured groups, whereas high school students were less prepared to be a part of groups without external structure. Finally, framing the opportunity for funding as peer-competition demotivated and discouraged some of the students, who did not receive the funding, leading to them not continuing to work on their initiatives.

One of the challenges faced was the delay in starting the course. It was intended to begin in the summer of 2019; however, it was postponed until the fall when students were returning back to school. The country's political instability was another obstacle that arose in the fall, which made it difficult to set the course's start date. The uprising, protests, and roadblocks limited and sometimes prohibited the movement of youth, the CMIC team, and LASeR's team. An additional challenge was the difficulty youths faced in balancing between their school/university obligations that were disrupted because of the country's instability and the course's requirements. To address this issue, the sessions were made flexible, and sometimes postponed, to accommodate the youth's school schedule to ensure their safety, especially those within the protests' proximity.

The lessons learned from working with youth in Tripoli further reinforce the importance of collaboratively working with community members. Future versions of the program will require a smaller class size, more facilitators, and more time to engage the youth to actually materialize their vision on the ground. Competition should not be prioritized, and funding opportunities should be framed as support for ideas that are ready for implementation, without taking away support for the in-process initiatives. Tremendous work and follow-up are needed to support youth in creating sustainable change in their communities. Community mobilization cannot be summarized in a short course, and requires constant support.

CONCLUSION: USING COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY ISSUES

The challenges faced by refugee youth seeking higher education are not easily addressed. As we also noted above, many programs exist that can help students gain access to higher education, but they are limited in scope. In addition, because these programs often are costly to run, and require collaboration with international actors, they require particular forms of administration and are often inflexible.

Those affected by major social issues—in this case, refugee students—often share the same insights into the issues and barriers they face that external 'experts' and 'professionals' identify. In other cases, they are able to see additional solutions and challenges that might not be readily apparent from another perspective. Because of this, we argue that they are excellently placed to design and implement initiatives that can address key challenges. The experience of this pilot showed that refugee youth can identify barriers and design projects that can help them meet their educational goals. In addition to working to solve the barriers they face, the youth can concretely experience their own capacity to work together and solve issues—empowering them in a way that no other experience can do.

However, a conviction that youth are able to create initiatives that can address key challenges does not mean they can do it alone. The role of structured support, such as the pilot offered by CMIC and LASeR, is crucial. On the one hand, it teaches formal skills that facilitate access to authorities, and can make the process of launching an initiative easier; on the other hand, it provides time, space, collaborators, and reassurance that you have the ability to carry your idea out.

The pilot course shows us that youth can in fact be mobilizers, but that they, like all community mobilizers, benefit from ongoing mentorship and support throughout the entire process of building initiatives. As policy makers, governments, donors, non-profits, and research institutions work to support greater access to higher education (and all educational opportunities) in Lebanon and worldwide, they must emphasize the role of community, not just as beneficiary of these programs, but as key actors in creating them. The local community's participation and leadership should be an essential component at all program stages, from design to implementation. The knowledge, expertise, and skills that the people themselves have are crucial to determining the best course of action for that community. With sustainable support, long-term initiatives can arise out of community mobilization processes, with youth and with refugee communities more broadly. These will serve to provide spaces for people to practice their agency over their lives, and not reinforce dependency on service provision, to the benefit of all.

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