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Webinar 6 – Social workers’ role in complementary pathways

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Introduction: The humanitarian corridors procedure

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Humanitarian corridors are a community-based initiative. The first protocol was signed in 2017 and allowed Syrians and Iraqis to access asylum visas granted by the French government. The procedure is complementary to resettlement, and additional to it. The protocol was renewed in 2021. Beneficiaries of international protection are granted asylum visas to France and are welcomed in France by groups of sponsors.

In Lebanon, a team of two works on supporting the visa request through the French Consulate and coordinates with partners to provide psychosocial assistance. In France, a national platform, and five different regional platforms provide support to the sponsor groups and the beneficiaries. The support is two-fold: the sponsor groups assist with daily life, and the regional platform provides administrative and legal support. The sponsor groups are not involved in the asylum procedure, only professionals with the relevant skills support the beneficiaries on this.

I. The role of social workers in Lebanon

Soledad André, Field Coordinator FEP, Beyrouth, Lebanon

In Lebanon, the FEP built a network of partners who refer eligible cases and support the FEP in assisting the beneficiaries. In the FEP team, the social worker is the first point of contact with the beneficiaries, with a phone call. Following the initial contact, several interviews are conducted by the team to assess the case and identify the relevant vulnerabilities – this procedure can take more than a year. The FEP is currently following 50 cases and works in partnership with the Italian humanitarian corridors, following a total of 90 to 100 cases.

The interviews help understand how to best assist the beneficiaries in Lebanon, depending on their vulnerabilities. A Lebanese partner, the Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH) assists with legal support (obtaining certain certificates) and other partners can provide any other support, such as housing. The social worker provides cultural orientation sessions with psychologists to prepare beneficiaries for life in France and the difficulties they may face.

The procedure encounters multiple challenges in Lebanon:

- Difficulties in accessing some services (medical, legal).
- Missing information, leading to new information discovered upon arrival in France.
- Confidentiality: the families share sensitive information during their interviews, which cannot necessarily be shared. Assessing what should or not be shared to help smooth the arrival and the reception can therefore be tricky.

II. The role of social workers in the reception and arrival phase in France

Guilhem Mante, Programme Coordinator, Humanitarian Corridors, FEP

The social workers assist with the asylum request and other administrative procedures that can be complex. Initially, beneficiaries were solely supported by the sponsors, which has led to issues with some of these administrative procedures, which sponsors did not do properly (opening the access to social rights was not done on time for example). This approach however leads to difficulties, as hosting places can be scattered in the French countryside. This limits the number of groups that the social worker can support.

Further, the work with sponsors is quite different than working with volunteers. In community sponsorships, the sponsors make a life-changing commitment, as they provide daily support to the beneficiaries. The involvement is intimate and personal, and therefore, setting boundaries for the social workers can be tricky. Sponsors can also be demanding and request the social worker's involvement outside working hours, at night or on the weekend, when they are holding their general assembly or board meetings for instance.

The transition to autonomy can also pose a challenge. Beneficiaries and sponsors will feel less supported, and the social workers will tend to continue supporting the beneficiaries although they should withdraw their involvement after a certain point. Further, in rural areas, social workers are not used to working with beneficiaries of international protection and can be unfamiliar with the administrative procedures required in such situations.

III. Q&A

- French Red Cross: What kind of training is provided to the social workers? The French Red Cross is currently developing some training tools for the reception of family reunification cases.

There is no specific training provided to the social workers. The training focuses on sponsor groups, and the same booklet developed by the FEP is used for both the social workers and the sponsors. This booklet is not available to the public, due to concerns regarding its fraudulent use.

- Forum réfugiés: Could you speak more about the mediation role of the social workers, and expand on some of the difficulties encountered regarding this?

This is a role that the social workers play in the project, as they are involved in supporting the refugees and sponsors. Sometimes, difficulties arise between refugees and sponsors, so the social workers try to understand what the challenges are, and with their experience, most of the time they can find solutions by providing inputs: sometimes it is a lack of understanding of certain procedures for instance. We also try to involve people with lived experiences of humanitarian corridors who are very good at explaining misunderstandings and misconceptions and supporting this mediation process. At times, national platforms can be involved when the regional platform cannot solve the issue or request the support of the national platform.

- Forum réfugiés: Practically, what does the preparation for France entail and what are the main misconceptions or aspects you need to explain to the beneficiaries?

Before every trip with each family and each member of the family, we will have final sessions with them, on the phone and in person and we talk about the trip, the departure, how they feel, and the fact that most of them leave their families in Lebanon (uncles, siblings etc), so the departure is quite emotional. Once they leave Lebanon, they are banned for 5 years and

cannot return. We try to manage expectations, as it is difficult for people in Lebanon to understand the challenges they will face in France: we explain the language barrier and the difficulties of learning it, the administrative complexities, etc. We also share pictures of the house they will live in, pictures of the people who are part of the sponsorship group and organize calls with the sponsors. All of this is done during the month before departure. There is also a group session during which all these aspects are addressed again: the health system, the educational system, religion at school, discussing mixed-gender swimming lessons, etc. Life in rural areas in France is difficult, and we prepare them for the daily life there, so we prepare them for that. It is very important to have these calls with the sponsors to avoid misunderstandings about being a refugee in Lebanon for example.

- Forum réfugiés: On the issue of confidentiality, how do you share the information you collect with contact points, and who is the referee person, do you have one per family for instance?

There are five regions where the FEP works in France, and in each region a colleague is coordinating the private sponsor groups: they are the point of contact. Regarding confidentiality, we always ask for consent before sharing any information, and we explain to the beneficiaries that they do not have to share everything with the sponsors: they can, but they do not have to. They have to share the information with the point of contact who is in charge of the asylum claim. The asylum claim is written in Lebanon and sent to the person in France. The social worker also writes a note contextualizing life in Lebanon and their vulnerabilities, with everything regarding social, medical, educational, and the asylum file.

- Do you manage to take into account the viewpoint of the people you accompany? If so, how do you do it, with which tools?

For the past two years, we have created discussion groups to address some of the issues. It led to some improvements in the project and how we support newcomers, especially in the first two months of arrival. We also developed a booklet to welcome the beneficiaries and explain to them what the steps of the project are: this was done after discussions with the discussion group. The group meets twice a year, but we would like to increase the frequency although it is challenging as people have conflicting schedules. This is something we want to pursue.