

## **R&R Syria AISBL**

### **Annual Report 2013**

*As adopted by the Ordinary General Assembly on 7 June 2014*

#### **I. Executive Summary**

Having started as an initiative by a group of friends who had lived in Syria or Lebanon in the past, Relief & Reconciliation for Syria AISBL (“R&R Syria”) is a young international NGO combining peacebuilding work with practical help in response to the Syrian crisis. We unite moral authorities of different confessions and groups around a common cause: the future of the youth. The official act of establishment of R&R Syria took place on 2 January 2013, uniting 25 founding members from all over Europe and the Middle East. The Royal Decree granting full legal personality was signed by the King of the Belgians on 18 December 2013 and published in the *Moniteur belge* on 22 January 2014. By the end of 2013, R&R Syria counted 112 members.

R&R Syria did not wait for the full legal personality to start its operations. The Founding Assembly of 2 January 2013 decided that the first country of implementation should be Lebanon as long as we cannot have open access to Syria itself. Lebanon is the country that is welcoming the highest amount of Syrian refugees both in absolute and in relative numbers. By 2014, Lebanon has become the country with the highest refugee population by capita in the entire world. More than 1 million Syrian refugees had been officially registered in the beginning of 2014. Also, Lebanon has experienced itself 15 years of civil war followed by 15 years of Syrian occupation. The wounds of the past have not yet healed and are putting the country at high risk to be dragged into the Syrian conflict. Hence, Lebanon is in urgent need for both humanitarian aid and peacebuilding.

In our activities, we seek to provide for international solidarity in the sense of service to those in need. Our international staff is mainly composed by highly qualified volunteers who are not earning more than their local Lebanese and Syrian colleagues. Through our presence in areas with need for both humanitarian aid and peacebuilding, we are trying to unite opposing groups and confessions around a humanitarian cause: the future of the youth in need. Under the auspices of a local Steering Committee, we have established a first Peace Centre in the Lebanese border region to Syria: a house that serves as a safe place for young people from all confessions and groups, Syrians and Lebanese, where educational staff helps to develop skills and arts. We provide for education, psychosocial support and also for material help and advocacy where needed. Until the end of 2013, we could reach more than 300 Syrians and Lebanese in need who have become beneficiaries of our regular assistance, mainly in the field of education.

## II. Activities in 2013:

The year 2013 was the year of establishment of R&R Syria under Belgian law. Our Lebanese chapter (“R&R Lebanon”) also obtained an own legal personality under Lebanese law, allowing us hence to have a sound legal basis for our work. The Lebanese Minister of Interior signed the decree recognising R&R Lebanon on 27 September; it was published on 3 October 2013.

### *(a) Peacebuilding Activities*

Our peacebuilding work is a work of long duration: we are trying to unite opposing factions and different communities around a common humanitarian goal. Our work shall always be focussed on mixed regions in confessional terms. The Board of Directors of R&R Syria designated the Akkar district in the North of Lebanon as first operational area. We started operations with the establishment of a regional Steering Committee composed by the Sunni Mufti of Akkar, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Halba, the Maronite Archbishop of Tripoli, the Alawi Sheikh representing the Akkar in the Alawite Council, and representatives of local civil society organisations. On 29 July 2013, the Steering Committee united for a first symbolic opening in the framework of a Peace Iftar for more than 150 Syrian refugees and 30 other Lebanese dignitaries.

The rental agreement for our first Peace Centre started as of 15 July 2013. From the beginning of October 2013, all three supporting programme lines were fully operational. The peacebuilding work was also integrated into the educational and psychosocial support given to different communities. Besides the Peace Centre in Bkarzla, a Maronite village in a mixed area, outreach centres were established in Michmich, a Sunni town in the mountain area of Akkar, and in an informal tented settlement in Minyara, which is composed by Sunni Syrian refugees. Preparations were under way for two further outreach centres in Hissa, an Alawite village in the plain area, and in Kroum Arab, a mixed village close to Halba. The Peace Centre serves not only as living place for our international volunteers and open guest house, but also as the central hub for all activities. Language classes and recreational activities are taking place in the premises and its surroundings. We chose explicitly a house in a natural environment to allow people to breathe. However, most beneficiaries of our humanitarian assistance in the field of education, emergency aid or psychosocial support are receiving our services directly in their place of living.

Besides the basic peacebuilding work accomplished through the very overarching structure of our local implementation, we practise other forms of conflict transformation in our daily activities, mainly in the educational sector. We apply a concept we call “Peacebuilding Mainstreaming”: integrating peacebuilding work into ordinary education. This concept is following the principle that education in emergencies must first and foremost cover the most basic needs before beneficiaries are open to discuss more sophisticated questions like war and peace. Peacebuilding modules are hence integrated into ordinary language classes or other basic subjects taught at school. These modules are part of the monthly training all our teachers receive (cf. below). In 2013, we implemented the first of these modules on non-violent action.

We are also striving to achieve peacebuilding and conflict transformation by spreading our outreach and our methodology. In this sense, we have started building up youth clubs at the first Peace Centre and its associated outreach centres, which commence as a simple conversation club with our international volunteers. The goal is to establish a network of local volunteers who will plan and implement small projects within their own community, for being brought together in a third phase on a monthly basis with R&R volunteer groups from other communities. The first clubs in Bkarzla and Mechmech have started their work in 2013. Our goal is to integrate also the Alawite community around the scheduled outreach centre of Hissa. The dissemination of our own methodology shall also be part of the “Syria Peace Network” that we started to unite amongst formal and non-formal Syrian organisations in Lebanon who join forces for improving their internal governance and for implementing best practises in the field of humanitarian aid so to convince international donors about the validity of their work. The idea for this network was born in the end of 2013; its establishment is foreseen for the beginning of the following year.

Our peacebuilding activities are governed by the Peacebuilding Programme Line Lebanon 2013-2015. This programme line also includes the authorisation for the basic set-up of our work. It foresees the establishment of up to two Peace Centres in Lebanon. The opening of the second Peace Centre in the Bekaa region is in preparation, foreseen for the second half 2014.

***(b) Humanitarian Emergency Aid***

Under the directives of the Humanitarian Programme Line Lebanon 2013-2015 we provide for practical help to the youth and their families. These activities also serve as a first contact point. In close cooperation with national and international organisations, we are responding to those needs that have so far been neglected. Our assessment has identified hygiene and first aid kits as the most urgent problems in the often informal refugee settlements. We are working on short-term distributions and long-term infrastructure solutions.

The Humanitarian Aid Programme has started in June 2013 in the Akkar district with first emergency distributions to newly arriving Syrian refugees who have survived the harsh battles of Qusayr and Homs. 40 families received first aid kits, including bandage materials and light medication. Furthermore, a medical dispensary under the surveillance of a Syrian doctor was furnished in September with medicaments for a total amount of more than \$2,400, enough for distributing medicaments to the community until the end of the year.

Much more emergency aid is needed, inside Syria but also in the Akkar district. The programmes of the UN and of the big international NGOs implementing them are underfunded and sometimes also questionable with regard to their efficiency. The introduction of “targeted assistance” in November 2013 has done much harm: more than half of the refugee families in the informal tented settlements we work in have been cut off from food vouchers or any other form of support. Our students started to be hungry in class and we felt obliged to provide for nutrition: every child is receiving every day fruits, biscuits, water and also a sandwich lunch if the class is just after school.

The biggest needs in terms of primary emergency aid in our operational areas are for the moment: a) medical, b) food and c) shelter. It is appalling to see that even in a relatively safe environment like Lebanon, Syrians have to die because of lacking medical assistance. The UN does not cover for any chronic diseases like cancer or diabetes and leaves huge gaps also for primary health care in other sectors. We tried to run specialised fundraising campaigns for individual medical cases we encounter in our work who do not receive any other form of assistance, but this model turned out to be ineffective. Only one person made a donation for the first case we had published.

Together with our Syrian partners and beneficiaries, we developed therefore a plan to support their medical dispensary in the long run under the supervision of a Syrian medical doctor. We need more funding in the coming year to make this plan work and to be of assistance also in the field of humanitarian emergency aid where nobody else is filling the gap.

### ***(c) Educational Activities***

Education is the heart of our daily activities. Education is key for the future of the youth, in Syria but also in Lebanon. With most Syrian children out of school for more than two years, the risk of a lost generation is a heavy liability not only for Syria. Radicalisation and sectarian hatred might find fertile ground. Under the directives of the Educational Programme Line Lebanon 2013-2015, we offer different educational activities to those in need. The main emphasis is put on foreign language teaching to prepare Syrian refugees for the Lebanese curriculum that is mostly taught in French and that is therefore the biggest obstacle for them to enrol and succeed in regular schools.

By the end of 2013, more than 250 children received regular education through the local staff members and international volunteers of R&R Syria. Educational activities started during summer in the framework of the Special Programme Ramadan Volunteers 2013: 70 children received daily intensive language classes in French and English for preparing enrolment with formal Lebanese schools. About half of them could successfully enrol in formal education. Despite intensive attempts and many promises made by the UN and the Lebanese Ministry for Education and Higher Education (MEHE), no places could be found for the other half. This is the main reason why we diversified our educational activities after the end of summer, covering the following areas: a) remedial classes for students who could enrol into Lebanese schools but who had difficulties in coping with the required French language skills (both Syrians and Lebanese), b) community-based education for Syrian children who could not enrol in Lebanese schools, c) basic literacy education for students who could not enrol in any form of school education because of their necessity to work.

All remedial classes (homework help) are taught by Lebanese teachers who are also teaching most of the participating students in school. Until the end of 2013, four Lebanese teachers were offering these classes for two hours each twice a week in two different locations: at our main Peace Centre in Bkarzla and at the first outreach centre in Mechmech; two further outreach centres were still in preparation in the end of 2013: Hissa and Kroum Arab. Our Irish partner organisation Schools for Syria promised in the end of 2013 to sponsor these homework classes.

The community-based education has been provided by two Syrian teachers employed by R&R Syria who are also living in the Minyara camp run by Sheikh Abdou from Qusayr. This informal “camp school” started in the end of October 2013 when it became clear that the UN promise of enrolling all Syrian school-aged children into Lebanese schools could not be fulfilled. The camp school is providing primary basic education to more than 80 children between 5 and 15 that are living in the camp and in a second location nearby. By the end of 2013, they have been roughly dividing into three grades that are more or less corresponding to the “cycles” in the Lebanese educational system (each cycle has normally three years). R&R Syria equipped the entire camp school with desks, chairs, blackboards, a bell, a copy machine and all necessary stationary materials. The camp school is teaching an adapted version of the Lebanese curriculum reduced to most basic needs with regard to Arabic literacy, mathematics and foreign language skills. Besides the two Syrian teachers, two of our international long-term volunteers are giving regular classes in English and French (English starting as from the first grade, French in addition as from the second grade). The ultimate goal also for the camp school is to enrol Syrian students into regular Lebanese schools, also for ensuring that they receive proper certification. This is the reason why French is added to English as from the second grade (considering that Syrian refugees rather wish to learn English than French).

Our four international long-term volunteers are also providing for regular language classes at the main Peace Centre and in the different outreach centres (Mechmech and the Minyara camp) in continuation to the intensive language classes taught during summer. These courses are supposed to be the starting point for the “work & learn” scheme that ought to bring basic literacy to those older children who have to work. Until the end of 2013, more than 80 adolescents were participating more or less regularly (also depending on the work load in their jobs) in seven different classes, most of them taught twice a week two hours each. We are preparing to offer also basic Arabic and math classes under this scheme, however it is difficult for most of these adolescents to commit to more than four to six hours per week due to their demanding job schedule. The “work & learn scheme” is furthermore complemented by the offer of vocational training. Until the end of 2013, one local teacher from Bkarzla was employed for giving sewing classes twice a week in a garage rent by Sheikh Abdou close to the Minyara camp. An accessories workshop and a class for electric workers offered by a French partner organisation were by the end of 2013 still in preparation.

All teachers and international volunteers hired by R&R Syria are receiving once a month a training day that is alternating between a) innovative pedagogical methods, b) peacebuilding modules and c) life skills modules. These modules are supposed to be implemented in all course work, especially in language classes. Until the end of 2013, the first two modules were implemented in the fields of non-violent action and environmental awareness. One of the greatest difficulties in pedagogical terms was the relationship to violence. Most of the students have been highly traumatised during the Syrian conflict; many had lost their parents or other family members. The systematic use of corporal punishment in Syrian schools was furthermore exacerbating this experience. Especially for experienced Syrian teachers, it was therefore difficult to implement forms of non-violent education. Through the training and constant pedagogical supervision in weekly meetings with all teaching staff, our international volunteers could successfully address this problem.

Besides the coverage of basic emergency needs described above, the educational crisis is one of the biggest problems of Syrians in Lebanon today. Most of Syrian school-aged children are still not enrolled in any form of education. In the beginning of 2014, the UNHCR said that there were more Syrian school-aged children in Lebanon than Lebanese: 340,000 against only 300,000 Lebanese in total. This shows how much Lebanon has to shoulder.

Our field staff is closely cooperating with other international and national actors active in the field of education in our operational areas. We are participating at the monthly educational working groups organised by UNICEF and the UNHCR and we are about to establish new partnerships. We hope to expand both our homework help and our informal camp school in 2014. We also plan to further elaborate our “work & learn scheme” and give it a more permanent structure.

#### ***(d) Psychosocial Activities***

Taking care of the youth also entails addressing the deep trauma Syrian children experienced in the war. Most of the students of our informal camp school were spontaneously drawing scenes of excessive violence when given a pen and a paper: bodies ripped apart, raped women and tanks shooting at children and rolling them over. Despite the fact that we had not yet adopted the final version of the foreseen Psychosocial Programme Line Lebanon 2013-2015, we started special activities for youth suffering from post-traumatic disorders already in 2013. With the advice of different child psychologist, we designed and implemented different recreational and cultural activities, both for children (7 to 12) and adolescents (13 to 19).

Psychosocial activities started in the framework of the Special Programme Ramadan Volunteers 2013 during summer with structured and regular recreational activities both for children and adolescents as enumerated above. Due to the high demand, also a day-care for younger children (3 to 7) was established in the premises of the Peace Centre. The structured recreational activities were continued after the summer with intensive art classes that were followed by regular weekly art sessions at the Peace Centre. The curriculum of these art workshops was elaborated under the supervision of a professional child psychologist. We also continued the summer tradition of our weekly cross-country games around the Peace Centre in Bkarzla at a less regular basis. At least once a month, the children from the camp school or from one of the other centres of activity are brought to Bkarzla for one afternoon in the woods and fields.

However, R&R Syria has not yet employed a permanent psychologist, as foreseen in the draft programme line. We are coordinating though with UNICEF, the UNHCR and other international or national NGOs that are providing professional psychological support. We also participate regularly in the child protection working group of the UNHCR and have referred several cases of concern amongst our beneficiaries to competent personnel. Many organisations are now entering the field of psychological assistance. It has to be evaluated to what extent an own offer of R&R Syria in this field is needed. In any case, we foresee to offer regular psychological consultations to our staff members both for the design of activities and for their own needs.

Last but not least, our local volunteer networks already mentioned under the peacebuilding activities are a corner-stone of our future planning in the field of psychosocial support. We want to empower the youth of different communities to help themselves and to connect with the world on an equal footing. We intend to twin local volunteers with internationals and make them participate also in encounters beyond borders, to broaden their horizon and build a network of true international solidarity that is not based on pity but on friendship.

### ***(e) Ramadan Volunteers***

The Special Programme Ramadan Volunteers Lebanon 2013 had indeed a special place in this year of establishment. Concurrent with the opening of the first Peace Centre in July, we decided to invite young people from around the world to serve as short-term volunteers and to help establish the standards of our work. 18 men and women followed this call and filled our Peace Centre with life. Their presence was a very rich experience and brought huge benefits to us and also to them, despite quite different cultural backgrounds and despite the fact that many work standards, both in terms of education and in terms of practical organisation, had still to be established.

The short-term Ramadan Volunteers laid the ground for our day-to-day activities especially in the field of education and psychosocial support. The overwhelming majority of those 15 out of 18 Ramadan Volunteers who participated in an anonymous online evaluation survey after the end of the programme draw a very positive picture of their work and of our organisation, adding though some practical suggestions for the future, especially with regard to the duration of the programme. Most of them have by now become active members of R&R Syria. Considering this positive experience, we decided to repeat the special programme also in 2014.

### **III. Financial Records**

The total expenditure by R&R Syria in 2012/13 were **€46,025.01** as detailed in the financial records annexed to this Annual Report. The total revenues of R&R Syria in 2012/13 were **€58,176.61** as detailed in the aforementioned financial records. This means that R&R Syria kept a positive balance of **€12,151.60** that will be transferred to the accounts of 2014.

Besides legal and banking fees, we have almost no administrative costs; more than 90% of all donations are directly benefiting those in need. As shown in the detailed financial records in the annexe, we could limit our international overhead costs to merely 3.58% of all expenditure, despite the fact that the fees for our legal establishment were quite important.

By the end of 2013, all basic rules for the internal governance of R&R Syria and its 12 national chapters were established. As for the accountancy, we plan to migrate from a cash-based to an accrual-based accounting system in 2014, refining also our accounting policy that has to obey the standards of both Belgian and national law in each country of implementation.

Here an overview of all revenues and all expenditure in 2013 as summarised in the detailed financial records adopted by the Ordinary General Assembly:

