

# Sheltering in Amman

Sudanese experiences and practices in a challenging urban environment

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## Introduction

In November 2015, hundreds of Sudanese refugees staged an open-ended sit-in outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Amman.<sup>1</sup> Protesting against marginalisation and dire living conditions in their community, they wrote their demands in a one-page letter addressed to the humanitarian community. “Urgent housing assistance” was the first of six demands. This article explores why.

The living conditions of Syrian refugees and the particular challenges they face in accessing adequate housing are well documented in Jordan.<sup>2</sup> Refugees of other nationalities, however, also struggle to pay for rent, food, health services and other essential household items.<sup>3</sup> Despite growing awareness of these ‘other’ refugee groups, available assessments, public data and statistics remain limited. Recent reports, including the Mixed Migration Platform’s two-part Displaced Minorities series, go some way to filling this gap.<sup>4</sup> Drawing attention to both conditions and the circumscribed assistance available to these ‘other’ refugees, available reports call for a more holistic approach to address the distinctive vulnerabilities and needs of all refugees, alongside those of Syrians.<sup>5</sup>

Building on these studies, this article seeks to bring forth personal insights of one such group of refugees in Jordan: Sudanese nationals. Based on 40 interviews with refugees and humanitarian agencies and extensive participatory engagement, including visits to around 70 households between October 2015 and May 2017,<sup>6</sup> we explore the housing

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<sup>1</sup> The Jordan Times (2015) Sudanese refugees’ protest near UNHCR enters 17th day.

<sup>2</sup> WFP & REACH (2015) Comprehensive Food Security Monitoring Exercise (CFSME): Syrian refugees in Jordan; CARE (2016) Six Years into Exile: The Challenges and Coping Strategies of Non-Camp Syrian Refugees in Jordan and their Host Communities; CARE (2017) 7 Years into Exile: How Urban Syrian Refugees, Vulnerable Jordanians and Other Refugees in Jordan are Being Impacted by the Syria Crisis: A Summary; NRC (2015) In Search of a Home: Access to adequate housing in Jordan; Ministry of Public Works and Housing (2017) Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessment. Sector template: Shelter.

<sup>3</sup> Davis R., Taylor A., Todman W., Murphy E. (2016) Sudanese and Somali Refugees in Jordan: Hierarchies of Aid in Protracted Displacement Crises, Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) MER 279, Summer 2016; ARDD-Legal Aid (2015) Putting Needs over Nationality. Meeting the Needs of Somali and Sudanese Refugees During the Syrian Crisis, Briefing paper, March 2015; ARDD (2016) Hidden Guests: Yemeni Exiles in Jordan, Protection Issues in Jordan Report; UNHCR (2017) Health Access and Utilization Survey: Access to Health Services in Jordan Among Iraqi Refugees: Baseline Survey; UNHCR (2017) Health Access and Utilization Survey: Access to Health Services in Jordan Among Refugees from Other Nationalities: Baseline Survey; Mixed Migration Platform (MMP) (2017) Displaced Minorities Part I: Migration and displacement trends of Somali, Sudanese and Yemeni refugees and other migrants in Jordan, Feature Article, April 2017; MMP (2017) Displaced Minorities Part II: Experiences and needs of Somali, Sudanese and Yemeni refugees and other migrants in Jordan, Feature Article, April 2017; Davis, R. & Taylor, A. (2012) Urban Refugees in Amman, Jordan, Institute for the Study of International Migration; Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) (forthcoming) On the Basis of Nationality: Access to Assistance for Iraqi and Other Asylum-seekers and Refugees in Jordan; CARE (2017) 7 Years into Exile.

<sup>4</sup> MMP (2017) Displaced Minorities: Part I, Part II.

<sup>5</sup> ARDD-Legal Aid (2015) Putting Needs over Nationality; Davis R., et al (2016) Sudanese and Somali Refugees in Jordan; MMP (2017) Displaced Minorities Part II; CARE (2017) 7 Years into Exile; MCC (forthcoming) On the Basis of Nationality: Access to Assistance for Iraqi and Other Asylum-seekers and Refugees in Jordan, MCC Jordan.

<sup>6</sup> This article draws on data collected for two research projects. From October 2015-May 2016, research amongst Sudanese refugees was undertaken as part of a larger study on the conditions and migratory aspiration of refugees in Jordan, funded by NTNU Social Research, Norway. In addition, from July-August 2016, a mixed-methods study, combining interviews with the World Health Organization’s Brief Quality of Life survey, was conducted on the psychosocial experience of Sudanese community members, funded by The Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice, USA. This report draws on 40 interviews (26 Sudanese refugees and 14 service providers) as well as extensive informal participatory interaction.

conditions and sheltering practices<sup>7</sup> among Sudanese refugees in Amman to understand why “urgent housing assistance” was listed as the protesters’ first demand to the humanitarian community. In doing so, this article analyses Sudanese experiences of living in Amman, their housing conditions, and the practices they use to cope, before suggesting some ways forward to improve the situation.

## Living in Jordan: Poverty, isolation, and discrimination

According to UNHCR, 3,868<sup>8</sup> Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers, as well as small groups of ‘other’ nationalities, are currently seeking refuge in Jordan, alongside hundreds of thousands of Syrians. While they receive some limited support, Sudanese in Jordan have found themselves largely forgotten as humanitarian resources and programmes are often prioritised for Syrian refugees.<sup>9</sup> Partly because of this, Sudanese refugees report living increasingly precariously in Amman.

Without adequate assistance, and banned from entering the formal labour market, Sudanese refugees depend on informal and intermittent work for survival. Unlike Arab refugees and migrants in Jordan, the Sudanese, as Black Africans predominantly originating from Darfur, are unable to blend in<sup>10</sup> and therefore seek work in ‘out of sight’ jobs such as construction, cleaning, and the transportation of goods. In these jobs, which many Jordanians perceive to be unattractive,<sup>11</sup> the risk of being caught by authorities for working illegally is relatively low, but pay is often minimal and the risk of exploitation significant. Whether working in Amman or its outer industrial suburbs, Sudanese report that they are often paid less than Jordanian, Egyptian or Syrian workers. Many have experienced not being remunerated at all. As one man explained: “Some people give you a load to transport. When you deliver it, they tell you: ‘We’re not going to pay you. Go complain’”. Syrians and other refugee groups without work permits also encounter exploitation in the informal sector,<sup>12</sup> but, according to an aid worker:

From what I hear it doesn't compare at all to the level of exploitation [faced by Sudanese]: [Sudanese] will work twelve-hour days and maybe get paid. Everybody knows [they] are not in a position to make claims, and any responsibility the employer feels to them is just not there, they know they have no recourse.

Many Sudanese refugees believe racism against non-Arabs<sup>13</sup> plays an important role in such exploitation, as well as in framing their experiences in Jordan more broadly. All Sudanese we talked to had encountered harassment from neighbours, landlords, employers or aid workers, as well as from pupils and teachers in school.<sup>14</sup> A mother of two recounted that other mothers ban their children from playing with Sudanese children “so they won’t smell as bad”. It is not uncommon for slurs like ‘*abu samra*’ (dark one) or ‘*chocolate*’ to be called out to Sudanese on the street, or, we were told, for taxi drivers or business owners to deny their services to Sudanese. Occasional physical violence<sup>15</sup> from mobs of young men was also recounted.

As a result, many Sudanese report feeling unsafe in their homes and uncomfortable in their neighbourhood. One man described the practical impact of this:

If you want to go out with your wife, you have to let your [Sudanese] neighbour know (in case you don’t come back), or take four or five people with you and go all together. Because maybe there’ll be issues.

Women, including those whose spouses were deported following the demonstration in 2015,<sup>16</sup> face specific struggles, and several told us they avoid leaving the house altogether and do not open the door to anyone. Likewise, parents fear

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<sup>7</sup> Housing conditions refers to the physical state of the homes in which refugees settle, whereas sheltering practices are the coping strategies that people adopt to overcome challenges they face in securing housing. The humanitarian sector uses ‘shelter’ to denote any architectural structure that is used for dwelling and that protects dwellers from the elements.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR (2017) UNHCR Jordan Overview Fact Sheet, September 2017.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR & IRD (2015) Living in the Shadows: Jordan Home Visits Report 2014; Davis R., et al. (2016) Sudanese and Somali Refugees in Jordan; ILO (2017) Work Permits and Employment of Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Towards Formalising the Work of Syrian Refugees; Hart, J & Kvittingen A (2015) Tested at the Margins: the Contingent Rights of Displaced Iraqi Children in Jordan, *New Issues in Refugee Research* 272, UNHCR; ARDD-Legal Aid (2015) Putting Needs over Nationality.

<sup>10</sup> Davis R., et al (2016) Sudanese and Somali Refugees in Jordan.

<sup>11</sup> ILO (2015) The Jordanian Labour Market: Multiple Segmentations of Labour by Nationality, Gender, Education and Occupational Classes.

<sup>12</sup> Stave, S. E & Hillesund, S (2015) Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian Labour Market: Findings from the governorates of Amman, Irbid and Mafraq, ILO & Fafo 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Tiber (2016) Africans in Jordan: Second-tier refugees, 27 January 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Tiber (2016) Seeking Asylum Again, 27 January 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Vice News (2014) Sudanese Refugees Are Being Attacked by Angry Mobs and Police in Jordan, 21 November 2014.

<sup>16</sup> BBC (2015) Jordan Departs Hundreds of Sudanese Asylum Seekers, 18 December 2015.

exposing their children to harassment outside, while at the same time worrying that they should not spend too much time cramped inside. A mother of two described her concerns saying:

I'm not just talking about my daughter, there are many other children suffering at school. I've seen it with my own eyes. They've left school. When my daughter returns from school, I wait for her on the steps because [neighbourhood kids] throw eggs and tomatoes at her.

Such unease about leaving their homes reinforces not only the physical, but also the social isolation felt and frequently expressed by Sudanese refugees. Unlike many Syrian and Iraqi refugees, Sudanese tend to lack personal connections in Jordan. As a young man in his twenties explained: "We are really the first generation who travelled, so [we have] no network and family abroad, not like the Iraqis". Sudanese also generally lack cultural and linguistic ties to build social networks with the Jordanian host community.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Sudanese are less able, if at all, to draw on connections outside of their own community for work, information, housing or social opportunities in Jordan. Finally, Sudanese are rarely afforded the media attention that has been and continues to be directed towards Syrian refugees in Jordan and the region. Service providers interviewed noted that many in the host community are largely unaware of their situation, let alone the nature of the conflict in Darfur and their reasons for fleeing. Together, social isolation, combined with the poverty and discrimination discussed above, uniquely frame the Sudanese experience, and further complicate their access to housing in the poorly-serviced urban areas of Amman.

## Housing problems: Quality and tenure

Access to adequate housing is a widespread challenge for refugees, asylum seekers and low-income citizens in Jordan.<sup>18</sup> Sudanese households often live in extremely poor and overcrowded conditions, sometimes lacking windows or doors. In some cases, people reported living in substandard basements and dilapidated buildings. A mother of two said: "The little one was affected. All of us were, my husband and I too, because the house was very damp and we all got sick". Another woman we met said she moved into an apartment costing 140 JOD per month but soon after relocated: "It was a basement, it was very damp, we couldn't stay there. We moved after 13 days". A young Sudanese family was earlier this year evacuated from their apartment by the government before the building collapsed due to, as neighbours said, "lack of maintenance since the [19]80s".<sup>19</sup>

Despite having been in Jordan for at least two years, many of the households we visited lacked basic items such as heaters for winter, and in some cases refrigerators. These items are often sold to cover rent payments. A young man explained that "sometimes two or three [non-related] people shared a blanket...winter is the most difficult time. There was a one-time distribution and they distributed blankets and money for gas. It was so helpful". As another young man explained, "we use gas for cooking but no gas for heating in winter as its too expensive".

Unstable and insufficient income prevents Sudanese refugees from securing better housing and leave many at constant risk of eviction and homelessness, a considerable stress for refugees. According to one woman:

[The landlord] tells me: 'On the 5<sup>th</sup>, I will come to your window [for] rent. If you don't have it, I will kick you out'. So now if the 5<sup>th</sup> comes and I don't pay, she will immediately kick me out of the house.

Their housing situation is particularly precarious because Sudanese predominantly reside in Amman so as to remain close to the UNHCR office, where rent is higher than in other Jordanian cities and villages. They must also compete for affordable housing with both poor Jordanians and other refugees who are similarly affected by the increase in rent prices (rents paid by respondents ranged from 100 to 150 JOD per month amongst families to 150 to 200 JOD for flats shared by single men). Additionally, many report facing difficulties in finding landlords who will rent to them at all; something they attribute to distrust and racism, as well as the perceived financial uncertainty of renting to Sudanese who lack stable incomes. In some cases, Sudanese borrow money or offer their passports as a measure of security for the landlord; as a result, some reportedly end up in significant debt to avoid losing their housing.

The housing situation for Sudanese in Amman is characterised by frequent relocation. A majority of our respondents had moved *at least* once in the past year due to eviction, deteriorating housing conditions, or harassment. A family of five

<sup>17</sup> Calhoun, N (2010) With a Little Help from our Friends: A Participatory Assessment of Social Capital among Refugees in Jordan, New Issues in Refugee Research 189, UNHCR.

<sup>18</sup> NRC (2015) In Search of a Home; Ministry of Public Works and Housing (2016) Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessment Sector Template: Shelter.

<sup>19</sup> 7iber (2017) "We lost the house": the stories of Jofeh's afflicted, 6 February 2017.

interviewed reported moving nine times in the last three years. The deportation of hundreds of Sudanese in December 2015<sup>20</sup> caused considerable disruption to affected households, as many of those who remained could no longer afford their rent and were forced to move elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> As one man said: “I used to live with six people. Four were deported, so now I live with a [Sudanese] family. They helped me out, hosted me”. Given the difficulties in securing adequate housing, many interviewees called for a camp to be built, akin to those for Syrian refugees, where they could live. As one protester said:

If you have enough prisons for all of us, take us to the prisons for a month until UNHCR prepares a camp. We don't have any financial means to live in the [...] city.

All in all, the challenge of accessing and maintaining safe and suitable housing, combined with the everyday challenges of poverty, social isolation and discrimination, is a source of profound stress for many in Jordan's Sudanese community.

## Sheltering practices

The main cause of Sudanese refugees' precarious housing situation is their chronic shortage of cash. As with Syrian and other refugees living in urban areas, rent is the single greatest monthly expense.<sup>22</sup> A majority of Sudanese reported receiving no cash or other assistance, such as food vouchers, which could partly offset the burden of paying rent. This has led the Sudanese community to adopt various coping strategies, mostly involving sharing housing and other resources. As one interviewee explained: “There's cooperation, but I'm in need, you're in need, everyone's in need. So maybe we contribute to rent, food, simple things; if I find work, maybe I'll bring food to share, this eases the situation”. Such sharing provides a lifeline for the newly arrived who often avoid moving outdoors for fear of being arrested pending the issuance of their asylum seeker certificate from UNHCR — a process, interviewees explained, that commonly takes around two months. Yet although such strategies suggest resilience amongst community members, they also highlight the lack of adequate solutions for the Sudanese. Furthermore, such coping strategies can lead to other protection concerns inside the living space.

Single men, who make up the majority of Sudanese refugees in Jordan, share flats — sometimes to the point of extreme overcrowding. It is not unusual for seven or more men to share a one-bedroom flat in Amman.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, several apartments function as de facto community reception accommodation for newly arrived men as well as transitional housing for others who lose their accommodation. The level of overcrowding in these homes depends on the number of arrivals and how quickly residents are able to find alternative housing. One respondent in his twenties recounted living with 35 other men in a two-bedroom apartment with a single hall, adding that “if you need the bathroom, you have to line up!”. Another man, who used to work night shifts as a janitor in a hospital, said that in his flat they arranged different sleeping shifts so that everyone could at least sleep on a mattress. Whilst providing transitional accommodation, some refugees live for prolonged periods in such conditions without being able to secure alternative housing because, another man explained, “most people have no jobs and you cannot kick someone out because he has no job”.

Such sharing arrangements also prove vital for single men with disabilities or medical conditions who are unable to work. If they receive a UNHCR monthly cash grant, they contribute to the rent and are in return looked after by their flatmates. Nevertheless, pooling resources is a consequence of dire need, not necessarily a sign of close relationships. Describing the relations between flatmates, one respondent said: “We treat each other as brothers. If I work and come with 7 [JOD] and others come with nothing, we share the money. We cook and eat together”. But, he continued, “we are brothers only in terms of money. Everyone has more than one problem [each], everybody feels depressed”.

Sharing housing is also practiced by families who feel they have no other options, including women whose husbands either work outside of Amman or have been detained for longer periods after being caught working illegally. Because the Sudanese community is generally conservative when it comes to its religious practices, cultural norms and tribal affiliation, families usually try to share housing with another family, preferably one with which they have tribal links. As one woman explained: “[The house] has a bedroom and a living room; the small family lives outside [in the living room]

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<sup>20</sup> HRW (2015) *Jordan: Deporting Sudanese Asylum Seekers*, 16 December 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Tiber (2017) *After the deportation: How Jordan left Sudanese refugees to death and separation*, 19 September 2017.

<sup>22</sup> NRC (2015) *In Search of a Home*; CARE (2017) *7 Years into Exile*. According to a shelter expert in Jordan, 30% of overall monthly expenditure is the national standard beyond which a household is considered unable to afford housing (personal communication, 12 October 2017).

<sup>23</sup> There are no statistics available on crowding amongst Sudanese households. However, over-crowding amongst Syrian refugee households means “an average of 3.4 persons sharing a bedroom (compared to 1.3 amongst the Jordanian population according to national statistics)”. See NRC (2015) *In Search of a Home*, p. 4.

and the big family lives inside [the bedroom]”. Whilst less common, particularly after the deportations, families have also resorted to sharing accommodation with single men.

The lack of sufficient housing options has resulted in discomfort and protection concerns also inside the home. Not only may overcrowding lead to domestic violence, but the sharing of housing with other families or single men also means that women and young girls need to remain veiled inside and that young women in particular are considered at risk of unwanted attention from male non-relatives. In balancing the need for housing with the need for safety, some families choose to split: the male family members live with other single men and the women and children share accommodation with other women and children. While this is not a common experience, the fact that some families have been pushed to consider such extreme solutions is concerning. Explaining that her husband was living with single men, whilst she lived with her children in a small room in a flat with another family, a mother of two explained “[now] my husband goes here and there; he’s roaming, roaming, yes a wanderer”.

A few Sudanese families and men moved out of Amman, predominantly in exchange for work. One couple interviewed lived in a small room in the garden of a villa in an upscale neighbourhood in West Amman at a discounted price, in exchange for the husband’s service in guarding the house. Other men worked as overnight guards at events in and out of Amman or on farms. Such work arrangements may last for two to three days or for months. The long, but intermittent, absences further complicate house-sharing arrangements and weaken tenure security.

Sudanese single men and families alike have adopted a variety of coping strategies to manage the high cost of rent, including sharing housing and exchanging housing for work. Whilst some of these strategies speak to the supportive nature of the Sudanese community, they also often result in overcrowding, discomfort and, at times, protection issues.

## Moving towards opportunities for improved shelter

Given the challenges Sudanese face in accessing adequate housing, it should come as no surprise that Sudanese protesters listed housing assistance as the first of several urgent needs. Furthermore, overcoming these challenges is no easy task given the shortage of affordable housing in Jordan, which pre-dates the conflict in Syria.<sup>24</sup> The housing market is now estimated to be short of 48,000-100,000 housing units, leaving low-income Jordanians, Syrians, and other urban refugees to compete for limited affordable housing.<sup>25</sup> Addressing this shortage is thus a component of the ‘Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis’<sup>26</sup> which aims to respond and mitigate the impact of the Syrian conflict on Jordan.

Our research into the housing situation and sheltering practices of Sudanese refugees in Jordan offers insights on the linkages between housing security, overall vulnerability and protection status. In seeking to address the overall housing crisis, and particularly when designing programmes to support access to adequate housing for poor Jordanians and Syrian refugees, it is important not to exclude ‘other’ refugees and to provide assistance on the basis of vulnerability, rather than nationality. We recommend the following to (I)NGOs, donors and policy makers:

1. Donors and shelter experts are encouraged to expand the **shelter vulnerability assessment framework** to include all refugee populations. Interviews revealed that Sudanese refugees face similar housing problems to Syrian refugees,<sup>27</sup> in addition to specific circumstances that further enhance their vulnerability. Generating comparable and reliable data for Sudanese and ‘other’ refugees could provide a basis for their inclusion into programmes and/or the development of new programmes.<sup>28</sup>
2. Donor and humanitarian agencies are encouraged to expand and harmonise **cash and voucher assistance interventions**<sup>29</sup> across Syrian and other refugee groups to support a ‘One Refugee’ approach. It would also

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Public Works and Housing (2017) Comprehensive Vulnerability Assessment. Sector template: Shelter.

<sup>25</sup> NRC (2015) In Search of a Home. According to the Government of Jordan, the shortage exceeds 100,000 housing units.

<sup>26</sup> Government of Jordan (2015) Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2016 - 2018.

<sup>27</sup> NRC (2015) In Search of a Home.

<sup>28</sup> Specific quantifiable data such as the annual rate of relocation, average rate of family occupancy, percentage of population under immediate threat of eviction, average rent expense and others can be paramount in guiding shelter-specialised agencies to prioritise programming on the basis of vulnerability, rather than nationality.

<sup>29</sup> Some Sudanese families were temporarily enrolled in a food vouchers scheme organised by a small NGO in 2016. They explained that this significantly released the pressure they experienced in terms of generating cash.

contribute to the issue of cash shortage and curb negative coping mechanisms among Sudanese, including excessive overcrowding and debt accumulation.

3. Extend the Jordan Compact<sup>30</sup> work permits scheme, which is currently exclusive to Syrians, to all refugees. This could pave the way for aid organisations to include others in their **financial literacy and small business management training**<sup>31</sup> **as well as other livelihoods initiatives** currently directed at Syrians. Such programmes would assist refugees in both managing their limited cash and generating income to reduce their dependency on fluctuating cycles of aid funding.
4. Establish programmes directed at the housing/protection nexus for ‘other’ refugees. Possible examples include the **Norwegian Refugee Council’s Integrated Shelter and Information Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA)** work, which has successfully decreased the short-term rate of depreciation of financial assets among households, secured tenancy for an interim period and improved the quality of housing.<sup>32</sup> By incorporating legal support and administering lease documentation, such projects can improve the security of tenure among supported households.<sup>33</sup>
5. Encourage **new collaborative schemes**, such as the Jordan Affordable Housing Programme (a collaboration between UN-Habitat, the government of Jordan, and the private sector), to deliver low-cost, small-sized and quality housing to lower-middle income Jordanians and refugees, without the use of subsidies.<sup>34</sup>

Overall, diversification of shelter projects and the commitment of humanitarian actors and the government to enhance overall housing access is central to Jordanian and Syrian refugee communities’ sustainable protection.<sup>35</sup> Other refugee groups, including Sudanese refugees, should not be excluded from such commitments; instead they should be protected and supported to the full extent possible based on their needs and the challenges they face.

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<sup>30</sup> Government of Jordan (2016) The Jordan Compact: A New Holistic Approach between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the International Community to deal with the Syrian Refugee Crisis.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, International Rescue Committee (2016) Jordan: Strategy Action Plan, March 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Brighton, N., Farmer, K. & Nordlie, Ø. (2017) ‘Security of tenure in the urban context,’ Forced Migration Review, FMR 55, June 2017; NRC Jordan Integrated Urban Shelter / ICLA Programme Evaluation 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Notio Partners (2016) NRC Jordan Integrated Urban Shelter / ICLA Programme Evaluation 2015.

<sup>34</sup> UN Habitat (no date) Jordan Affordable Housing Project.

<sup>35</sup> Kelberer, V. (2015) No place to call home: government of Jordan blocks shelter projects for Syrian refugees.