



The Collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR in Addressing the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon through the Child Friendly Spaces Program

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the Syrian refugee crisis since 2011 which poses great challenges for children, especially in Lebanon. The purpose of this article is to examine the collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR in protecting refugee children through the Child Friendly Spaces program, emergency education, and psychosocial support. With a descriptive qualitative approach based on a literature review, the Child Friendly Spaces program plays an important role as a starting point for protection and trauma recovery. This collaboration responds to needs in a holistic and human rights-based manner, and supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Kata Kunci

Jaringan Advokasi Transnasional, Pengungsi Suriah, perlindungan anak, Save the Children, UNHCR

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas krisis pengungsi Suriah sejak tahun 2011 yang menimbulkan tantangan besar bagi anak-anak, khususnya di Lebanon. Tujuan dari artikel ini untuk mengkaji kolaborasi antara *Save the Children* dan UNHCR dalam melindungi anak pengungsi melalui program *Child Friendly Spaces*, pendidikan darurat, dan dukungan psikososial. Dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif berbasis studi literatur bahwa program *Child Friendly Spaces* berperan penting sebagai titik awal perlindungan dan pemulihan trauma. Kolaborasi ini merespon kebutuhan secara holistik dan berbasis hak asasi manusia, serta mendukung pencapaian *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs).

INTRODUCTION

The prolonged conflict in Syria has compelled millions of residents to flee their homes, with children emerging as the most affected demographic. Beyond being victims of violence and displacement, children encounter multiple layers of vulnerability as refugees—ranging from the loss of access to education and limited healthcare services, to heightened risks of exploitation, child labor, and psychological trauma. Within displacement contexts, these challenges are exacerbated by infrastructural limitations, ambiguous legal status, and socio-economic pressures in host countries such as Lebanon. Existing studies highlight that access to education for Syrian refugee children remains severely constrained, often reflecting a gap between formal policy commitments and actual implementation on the ground (Buckner, Spencer, & Cha, 2018; Shuayb & Makkouk, 2014).

Lebanon has experienced a severe refugee crisis since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. According to UNHCR, as of July 2024, approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 11,411 refugees from other countries are residing in Lebanon, accounting for nearly 25 percent of the country's total population. The distribution of refugees is uneven, with around two-thirds concentrated in northern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. This large influx has occurred amid Lebanon's fragile economic conditions, where a significant proportion of the population lives below the poverty line. These structural constraints have intensified competition over limited resources and increased the vulnerability of refugees in accessing basic services such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education (Culbertson & Constant, 2015; Kelley, 2017).

The challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon are multidimensional, particularly concerning legal status and access to essential services. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, resulting in the absence of a formal legal protection framework for refugees. Consequently, refugees face restricted access to employment, education, and social services. Empirical evidence suggests that a significant proportion of refugee children remain out of school, despite various international and national initiatives aimed at expanding access (Albakri & Shibli, 2019; Garbern et al., 2020). Moreover, economic insecurity and limited access to healthcare further compound their vulnerability, often forcing households to prioritize immediate survival needs over long-term investments such as education.

In response to these challenges, humanitarian organizations play a crucial role in supporting refugee populations, particularly vulnerable groups such as children. International actors such as UNHCR and Save the Children have implemented a wide range of interventions, including formal and non-formal education programs, child protection services, and psychosocial support. These interventions are often delivered through multi-stakeholder partnerships involving governments, NGOs, and local communities. However, previous research indicates that while such collaborations are widely recognized at the policy level, their effectiveness at the level of program implementation remains uneven and underexplored (Brun & Shuayb, 2020; Akar & van Ommering, 2018).

Despite the growing body of literature on refugee governance and humanitarian response, there remains a significant research gap regarding how operational partnerships between international organizations—particularly UNHCR and Save the Children—function at the program implementation level in host countries such as Lebanon. Existing studies tend to focus on macro-level policy frameworks or access outcomes, while paying limited attention to coordination mechanisms, division of roles, and practical challenges in delivering services on the ground. This gap is particularly important given that implementation dynamics often determine the actual effectiveness of humanitarian interventions.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research questions: (1) How do operational partnerships between UNHCR and Save the Children function in the implementation of programs targeting Syrian refugee children in Lebanon? (2) What challenges and constraints affect the

effectiveness of these partnerships in delivering education, protection, and basic services? (3) How do these implementation dynamics shape outcomes for refugee children and broader host-community stability?

The case of Lebanon is not only empirically significant due to the scale and intensity of the refugee crisis but also theoretically important for advancing scholarship on humanitarian governance and multi-actor collaboration. Lebanon represents a critical case of a non-signatory host state with limited institutional capacity, where international organizations play a central role in service provision. As such, it provides a valuable context for examining how global humanitarian norms and partnership models are translated into practice under conditions of legal ambiguity, resource scarcity, and political fragility. Insights from this case can contribute to broader theoretical debates on the effectiveness of international cooperation, the localization of aid, and the governance of protracted refugee crises.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs)

The concept of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) was introduced by Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink in their influential work *Activists Beyond Borders* (1998). TANs refer to networks of actors connected across national boundaries who share common concerns about normative issues such as human rights, environmental protection, women's rights, and social justice, engaging in information exchange and advocacy to advance these causes. These actors include international and local NGOs, media organizations, state actors, multinational institutions, and individuals committed to a shared issue (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

In *The Power of Human Rights* (1999), Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink expanded the understanding of TANs through the spiral model approach. The spiral model explains how international pressure and advocacy by TANs can influence states to adopt and internalize human rights norms. Meanwhile, Sidney Tarrow, in *The New Transnational Activism* (2005), highlighted that globalization has created new spaces for cross-border social movements while cautioning that power relations within these networks are not always equal. Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink, in *Restructuring World Politics* (2002), emphasized that the success of TANs largely depends on domestic political contexts, civil liberties, and support from media and international institutions.

TANs play a crucial role in facilitating the diffusion of ideas, exerting moral pressure, and shaping international policy agendas on issues such as human rights, environmental conservation, women's empowerment, and social justice. The concept underscores the power of information, symbolism, and influence—rather than material resources—in driving change. Keck and Sikkink (1998) identified several defining characteristics of TANs: (a) Shared values and principles – Actors within the network are united by a common normative commitment; (b) Information exchange – Information serves as a core tool for awareness-building, policy advocacy, and legitimacy creation; (c) Cross-border activism – The network operates beyond state boundaries, connecting local and global actors; (d) Advocacy strategies – Activities include media campaigns, reporting violations, and lobbying international institutions; (e) Horizontal and flexible relationships – TANs are not hierarchically structured like formal organizations but function more fluidly and participatorily.

In practice, TANs often operate through what is known as *the boomerang pattern*. This pattern occurs when domestic actors in a given country face restrictions or obstacles in influencing their own government directly, prompting them to form alliances with international actors possessing greater influence. These international allies, in turn, exert external pressure on the domestic government through global public opinion, international media, and multilateral institutions. Such feedback pressure can open avenues for domestic policy reform and accountability. Through this process, TANs become powerful mechanisms for promoting government accountability, particularly in contexts where political systems are repressive or closed.

This study identifies TAN characteristics within the collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR through the Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) program, which addresses the Syrian child refugee crisis in Lebanon. To deepen the analysis of TANs, it is essential to also examine the role of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs).

International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO)

International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are non-profit, non-governmental organizations operating across national borders to address global issues such as human rights, environmental protection, education, and development. INGOs are typically established by individuals or civil society groups concerned with global challenges, functioning independently of any single government (Yusnita, 2023).

According to David Lewis, INGOs are entities with transnational organizational structures oriented toward social or humanitarian objectives, acting as intermediaries between local and international actors in global diplomacy (Mufty, 2023). They are often categorized as part of global civil society, serving as agents of social change and international policy advocacy.

INGOs perform diverse and complex roles. Among their primary functions is to advocate for policy reform at both international and national levels, supporting marginalized communities in claiming their rights and achieving justice (Wulan & Mukhtiali, 2013). They are also deeply involved in humanitarian aid, public education, and the documentation and reporting of human rights violations. For example, Amnesty International conducts global campaigns to prevent ethnic discrimination and human rights abuses, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31 (United Nations, 1996), the defining characteristics of INGOs include: (a) Non-governmental nature – INGOs operate independently of state control and are not part of governmental structures; (b) International scope – They operate in more than one country and are not confined to local activities; (c) Alignment with UN principles – INGOs must uphold values such as peace, human rights, sustainable development, and international solidarity; (d) Substantive contribution to UN programs – INGOs must possess the capacity to participate meaningfully in UN consultations and program implementation; (e) Legal recognition and transparency – INGOs must have formal legal status, a charter, and a clear governance structure.

Notable examples of INGOs include Amnesty International (focused on human rights), Greenpeace (environmental advocacy), Save the Children (child protection and education), and the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), which focuses on biodiversity and environmental conservation. Collectively, these organizations function as non-state actors bridging global and local interests, strengthening inclusive and responsive global governance in the face of humanitarian and environmental challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach with a focus on document-based analysis (library research) to examine the collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR in addressing the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, particularly in the domain of child protection. The qualitative design is chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of humanitarian practices, institutional roles, and advocacy dynamics within the framework of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs).

The unit of analysis in this study is the collaborative interaction between international humanitarian actors, specifically Save the Children and UNHCR, in implementing child protection programs, particularly the Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) program. This includes examining their roles, strategies, coordination mechanisms, and programmatic interventions as non-state actors operating within global humanitarian governance. The analysis also considers how these actors contribute to

broader normative frameworks such as human rights protection and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The temporal scope of this research focuses on the period from 2011 to 2024. This timeframe is selected as it captures the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011 and its subsequent development into a protracted humanitarian situation, including recent program implementations and policy responses in Lebanon. By covering this period, the study is able to trace the evolution of collaborative strategies and assess their continuity and adaptation over time.

Data collection relies on secondary data obtained from credible and relevant sources, including official reports from Save the Children and UNHCR, academic journal articles, policy papers, and publications from international organizations such as UN agencies, ReliefWeb, and humanitarian research institutions. These documents provide comprehensive insights into program implementation, policy frameworks, and the broader context of refugee protection in Lebanon.

The data analysis technique combines descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. Descriptive analysis is used to systematically present information related to the roles, programs, and operational mechanisms of the actors involved. Meanwhile, thematic analysis is applied to identify recurring patterns, key themes, and strategic approaches in the collaboration, such as advocacy strategies, coordination mechanisms, and child protection practices. Through this method, the research highlights how humanitarian actors construct meaning, respond to challenges, and contribute to both immediate protection efforts and long-term normative goals.

By integrating unit of analysis, temporal scope, and systematic analytical techniques, this methodology provides a structured framework to understand the complexity of humanitarian collaboration and its implications within the broader context of international relations and global governance.

HUMANITARIAN COLLABORATION DYNAMICS

Lebanon's National Policy Efforts in Addressing the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Since the outbreak of the armed conflict in Syria in 2011, Lebanon has become one of the primary destinations for millions of displaced Syrians. Its geographical proximity, combined with long-standing historical and social ties, has placed an immense burden on Lebanon—one of the countries with the highest refugee-to-population ratios in the world. Managing the Syrian refugee crisis poses serious challenges to Lebanon's social, economic, and political stability.

Institutionally, Lebanon faces structural limitations because it has neither ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Consequently, the Lebanese government does not officially recognize Syrians as “refugees,” but rather classifies them as displaced persons. This approach has resulted in restricted legal protection and limited access to basic rights such as formal employment, social services, and long-term legal security (Janmyr, 2020).

As a response, the government established the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) — the country's main policy framework for managing the consequences of the Syrian conflict. The LCRP aims to coordinate national efforts with international actors, particularly UN agencies and humanitarian organizations, focusing on the provision of basic needs, social protection, education, healthcare, and community resilience. This approach represents a burden-sharing model, where responsibility for managing refugees is shared between the state and the international community (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2024).

In terms of regulation and security, Lebanon has implemented restrictive residency and mobility policies for Syrian refugees. Since 2015, the government has introduced complex administrative requirements — including fees for residency renewal and limitations on employment

sectors — to control refugee numbers and protect the domestic labor market. However, these measures have increased the social and economic vulnerabilities of refugees, especially women and children (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In the education sector, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) launched the Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) initiative, which allows Syrian refugee children to attend public schools through a double-shift system. While this policy demonstrates Lebanon's commitment to the right to education and to preventing a "lost generation," limited funding and institutional capacity have hindered full implementation (Akar & Van Ommering, 2018).

Politically, Lebanon maintains a cautious stance toward long-term refugee integration. The government consistently rejects resettlement or naturalization policies, citing concerns over demographic balance and sectarian stability. Consequently, Lebanon's approach remains focused on temporary protection and promoting voluntary repatriation once conditions in Syria become favorable (Janmyr & Mourad, 2018).

Overall, Lebanon's response to the Syrian refugee crisis remains reactive and highly dependent on international assistance. Structural legal gaps, economic fragility, and political sensitivities have necessitated extensive engagement from global humanitarian actors — positioning Lebanon as a focal point of transnational humanitarian collaboration.

The Complementary Relationship between Save the Children and UNHCR in Managing Child Friendly Spaces (CFS)

The collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR in managing Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) in Lebanon represents an integrated humanitarian partnership model. Although detailed division of roles varies by program, reports from Daleel Madani indicate that UNHCR operates CFS units in registration centers focused on recreational activities and information dissemination, while Save the Children acts as an implementing partner recognized in UNHCR's operational reports (Daleel Madani; UNHCR Operational Portal).

Both organizations function within the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) framework, which involves over 118 partner organizations aiding more than 3.2 million people affected by the crisis. Coordination occurs through sectoral working groups — including child protection, education, and basic assistance — to ensure alignment with humanitarian standards (LCRP 2023; IOM Lebanon). Operationally, Child Friendly Spaces follow international standards established for humanitarian emergencies. According to BMC Public Health (2019), CFS programs serve as psychosocial interventions designed to address threats to children's well-being, including exposure to violence, abuse, and developmental disruption. Save the Children's Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies Handbook outlines structured implementation guidelines emphasizing safety, learning, and resilience.

This collaborative approach exemplifies the principles of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) by fostering horizontal coordination and knowledge sharing among organizations. The LCRP platform facilitates resource optimization and operational standardization while minimizing program duplication. Moreover, the concept of CFS symbolizes value-based advocacy, presenting refugee children not merely as aid recipients but as rights-bearing individuals with agency and potential — aligning with universal human rights norms championed by TANs.

Collaborative Child Protection Program with a Holistic Approach

The collaborative programs between Save the Children and UNHCR are designed to ensure comprehensive protection for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon through a holistic and interrelated framework. These programs integrate four key areas that together create a continuum of care —

beginning with the establishment of safe learning spaces and extending to education, psychosocial recovery, and community-based protection systems.

The first major component of this collaboration is the establishment of Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) across various regions in Lebanon. These centers provide safe and structured environments where refugee children can play, learn, and access psychosocial support. According to UNICEF Lebanon, Child Friendly Spaces serve as protective and stimulating environments that enable refugee children to adjust to their new surroundings. The program adopts a progressive model in which children gradually rebuild a sense of stability through daily routines and guided activities. Implementation is carried out in close partnership with local communities to foster inclusivity between Lebanese and Syrian children. This integrated approach not only supports emotional recovery but also promotes social cohesion and mutual understanding between host and refugee populations.

The second focus of the collaboration is on emergency education, which seeks to address the severe learning crisis among Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. More than half of the 488,000 school-aged Syrian children remain out of school, and enrollment rates in public institutions remain below 30 percent, with fewer than four percent progressing to secondary education, as reported by the Education and Development Forum (2024). To respond to these challenges, Save the Children and UNHCR implement a dual-track strategy combining formal and non-formal education. The formal education initiative, developed in collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Education, integrates refugee children into public schools through afternoon or “double-shift” classes. Meanwhile, non-formal education programs focus on accelerated learning and basic literacy and numeracy for children unable to attend formal schools due to documentation issues or limited capacity. Together, these efforts aim to prevent the emergence of a “lost generation” by ensuring sustained access to education during displacement.

The third aspect of the collaboration concerns mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), which is structured around a multi-layered intervention model. At the community level, structured recreational activities are implemented as universal psychosocial interventions. These activities help children express emotions, maintain a sense of identity, and build social relationships in safe environments such as the Child Friendly Spaces. Studies in humanitarian psychology, including those published in BMC Public Health (2019) and the Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub (2014), demonstrate that structured recreational engagement within CFS contributes to children’s emotional recovery and reduces post-crisis distress. Beyond these community-level interventions, the program also offers more targeted psychosocial support through play therapy groups, counseling sessions, and peer-based emotional support for children experiencing mild to moderate stress. For children suffering from complex trauma, specialized mental health services are provided, including psychological assessments, individual therapy based on trauma-informed care, and psychiatric referrals when needed. This comprehensive tiered model reflects the standards established in the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, allowing interventions to be adjusted according to the severity of psychological needs.

Finally, the collaboration strengthens community-based child protection systems as a response to the limited formal child protection infrastructure in Lebanon. These systems rely on trained volunteers from both Syrian refugee and Lebanese host communities. Volunteers receive intensive training in recognizing signs of abuse, communicating with children affected by trauma, following established referral procedures, and understanding the legal frameworks that underpin child protection. Each refugee settlement operates a Child Protection Committee equipped with an early warning mechanism to detect risks and a holistic case management process that coordinates the involvement of social workers, educators, and medical personnel. These committees prioritize the prevention of child marriage, child labor, and gender-based violence, as well as the rehabilitation and reintegration of children who have experienced exploitation. The structure follows UNHCR’s child protection standards

and represents an important model for community empowerment and participatory governance in humanitarian settings.

Overall, this collaborative program between Save the Children and UNHCR demonstrates a rights-based and holistic approach to child protection. By integrating psychosocial, educational, and community protection dimensions, the partnership creates a comprehensive support system that addresses both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term social resilience. This integrated framework not only mitigates the vulnerabilities of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon but also contributes to the broader goal of strengthening sustainable and inclusive protection mechanisms within crisis-affected societies.

Critical Reflection on the Collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR

The Collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR within the Framework of Transnational Advocacy Networks

The collaboration between Save the Children and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in implementing the Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) program for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon represents a concrete realization of the principles of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs). This partnership demonstrates how international and non-governmental organizations can transcend national boundaries to jointly advocate for human rights and protection for vulnerable groups, particularly children affected by conflict and displacement.

According to Keck and Sikkink's theory of Transnational Advocacy Networks, TANs consist of interconnected actors—both state and non-state—who share common normative values and collaborate through the exchange of information, solidarity, and coordinated action to influence policies and behaviors across borders. In this framework, Save the Children and UNHCR serve as pivotal actors that merge complementary capacities. Save the Children, as an international non-governmental organization specializing in child protection, provides field-based expertise, programmatic innovation, and direct engagement with refugee communities. UNHCR, as a United Nations body mandated to safeguard the rights of refugees, contributes international legitimacy, policy authority, and access to governmental and intergovernmental decision-making processes. Together, they form a multi-layered advocacy network that bridges global norms with local implementation.

The Child Friendly Spaces program—initiated as part of the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis—functions as both a protection mechanism and a form of advocacy in action. Beyond providing safe spaces, the program embodies the symbolic and normative power of TANs by advancing the principle that all children, regardless of nationality or legal status, are entitled to protection, education, and psychosocial care. This rights-based framework situates child protection within the universal human rights discourse, while simultaneously addressing the contextual realities of Lebanon's fragile infrastructure and restrictive refugee policies.

Within the Lebanese context—where more than one million Syrians have sought refuge since 2011—the absence of a formal refugee protection framework has rendered Syrian children highly vulnerable to exploitation, child labor, early marriage, and psychological trauma. The collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR thus operates as a transnational mechanism that not only delivers humanitarian assistance but also exerts normative pressure on both domestic and international actors to prioritize child protection in policy agendas. The network's advocacy efforts, supported by continuous data collection and program evaluation, help reinforce the accountability of state institutions and international donors toward the protection of refugee children.

This collaboration also reflects the operational dynamics of what Keck and Sikkink describe as the boomerang pattern, in which domestic advocacy groups—facing limitations in influencing their national governments—leverage international allies to apply external pressure that leads to policy

change. In Lebanon's case, local NGOs and child protection actors often face legal and political constraints, prompting reliance on international organizations like Save the Children and UNHCR to amplify their advocacy at the global level. Through this transnational interaction, humanitarian and advocacy networks create a feedback loop of influence—where local realities inform global discourse, and international norms are diffused back into local practices.

The partnership's strength lies in its horizontal coordination and shared advocacy objectives rather than hierarchical control. Decision-making processes are shaped by mutual consultation, information sharing, and respect for each organization's mandate. For instance, Save the Children focuses on the design and implementation of child-focused programs, while UNHCR ensures alignment with international refugee protection frameworks and mobilizes donor support. This structure mirrors the non-hierarchical, participatory nature of TANs, which rely on trust, knowledge exchange, and moral legitimacy rather than coercive power.

Moreover, this collaboration underscores how Transnational Advocacy Networks function as channels for norm diffusion. Through the CFS program, Save the Children and UNHCR translate abstract global principles—such as the rights of the child, the best interests of the child, and non-discrimination—into tangible local interventions. These initiatives help transform refugee protection from a policy ideal into a lived practice, thereby strengthening community resilience and embedding human rights norms in humanitarian action. Over time, such sustained interaction between local implementation and global advocacy contributes to the internalization of international child protection standards within Lebanon's humanitarian governance system.

In summary, the Save the Children–UNHCR collaboration within the framework of Transnational Advocacy Networks demonstrates how global humanitarian partnerships can function as vehicles for both immediate relief and long-term normative transformation. By linking grassroots initiatives with international advocacy, the network creates a dual impact—addressing the urgent needs of Syrian refugee children while fostering the diffusion of universal human rights norms across borders. This model highlights the evolving role of TANs not only as advocates for policy change but also as active agents in shaping the moral and institutional architecture of global humanitarian governance.

The Contribution of the Collaboration to the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The collaboration between Save the Children and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has made significant contributions to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Lebanon, particularly within the protracted humanitarian crisis that continues to affect millions of Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities. By combining their institutional capacities, mandates, and programmatic expertise, both organizations have aligned their interventions with global development targets that emphasize inclusivity, equality, and human rights.

One of the most tangible contributions of this collaboration lies in advancing SDG 4 (Quality Education), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all. Lebanon's education system has been severely strained by the influx of refugees, with nearly half of the approximately 500,000 school-aged Syrian children excluded from formal education, according to the Human Rights Watch (2016) report. In response, Save the Children and UNHCR have worked together to expand access to both formal and non-formal education through the establishment of double-shift public schools, accelerated learning programs, and community-based classes. These initiatives not only prevent school dropouts but also offer a protective environment that reduces the risks of child labor and early marriage. According to Save the Children's 2020 report *Keeping Learning Alive in Lebanon*, more than 18,000 Syrian refugee youth were at risk of becoming child laborers due to poverty, underscoring the importance of continuous educational support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both organizations

adapted their programs to distance learning modalities to ensure continuity of education when over 1.2 million children in Lebanon were unable to attend school.

The collaboration also contributes to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by addressing economic vulnerability and social exclusion among refugees and impoverished Lebanese families. Through UNHCR's Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance Programme (MCAP), approximately 40 percent of extremely vulnerable households received financial support to meet their basic needs. In 2024, UNHCR allocated nearly US\$88 million for cash assistance in Lebanon, benefiting both Lebanese citizens and refugees, while Save the Children complemented these efforts by providing targeted livelihood programs and emergency relief for children and families most at risk. These measures mitigate inequality by promoting shared resilience and reducing dependence on negative coping strategies such as child labor and early marriage.

Furthermore, the partnership strengthens SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by fostering inclusive humanitarian governance and social stability. Within the framework of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), Save the Children and UNHCR are part of a network of more than 110 partner organizations that collectively assist over 2.8 million people. Their coordination efforts in child protection, education, and community engagement enhance the effectiveness of Lebanon's crisis response mechanisms and promote accountability within humanitarian interventions. Through capacity-building programs for local institutions and civil society, the collaboration helps to institutionalize principles of transparency, participation, and child rights protection in national systems.

At the same time, the partnership aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) by integrating mental health and psychosocial support into child protection initiatives. The Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) model provides safe environments for children to process trauma, engage in recreational learning, and receive counseling and psychological support. Evaluations of these programs, including those conducted by BMC Public Health (2019) and UNHCR's 2019 performance assessments, show positive outcomes in improving children's emotional well-being and community resilience. These interventions not only address immediate psychosocial needs but also contribute to the broader health and social stability of refugee communities.

Despite the significant progress achieved through this collaboration, substantial challenges remain. Ongoing political instability, economic collapse, and recurrent crises—exacerbated by the 2020 Beirut port explosion and subsequent economic downturn—have disrupted public services and deepened social inequality. Education continues to be interrupted for more than 1.5 million children, with many public schools repurposed as temporary shelters during times of crisis, as reported by Save the Children International (2023). The prevalence of child marriage among Syrian refugees remains officially recorded at around six percent, though the actual figure is believed to be higher due to underreporting. These persistent challenges illustrate the fragility of Lebanon's humanitarian infrastructure and highlight the need for sustained international commitment and multi-sectoral coordination.

In a broader sense, the collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR exemplifies how humanitarian partnerships can advance the SDGs even within crisis-affected contexts. By integrating immediate relief with long-term developmental goals, their programs not only alleviate suffering but also strengthen the foundations for sustainable peace, equity, and resilience. The partnership's impact demonstrates that achieving the SDGs in fragile states requires cross-sectoral cooperation, rights-based programming, and continuous advocacy at both local and global levels.

Ultimately, the joint efforts of Save the Children and UNHCR represent a model of transformative humanitarian action, where emergency response is intrinsically connected to sustainable development objectives. Their work reinforces the principle that humanitarian assistance, when grounded in human rights and aligned with global goals, can simultaneously address urgent needs and

pave the way toward a more equitable and inclusive future for refugee children and their host communities.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the theoretical literature on Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) by demonstrating how the framework, originally developed to explain norm diffusion at the macro-political level, can be extended to account for operational humanitarian partnerships at the program implementation level. While Keck and Sikkink (1998) conceptualized TANs primarily as advocacy instruments operating through information exchange, moral pressure, and the boomerang pattern, the Save the Children–UNHCR collaboration in Lebanon reveals a complementary dimension: TANs as vehicles of localized norm institutionalization. Rather than merely exerting external pressure on state actors, these transnational networks actively embed international child protection standards into community-level practices through sustained programmatic engagement. This finding advances TAN theory by distinguishing between advocacy-oriented TANs—which operate through persuasion and pressure—and implementation-oriented TANs, which translate normative frameworks into concrete service structures on the ground.

Second, this study refines the understanding of INGOs within TAN dynamics. The collaboration examined here demonstrates that INGOs such as Save the Children do not merely serve as conduits for information or as pressure agents; they function as technical architects of norm implementation, deploying programmatic expertise to operationalize abstract principles—such as the best interests of the child and non-discrimination—into structured interventions including the Child Friendly Spaces program, emergency education, and multi-tiered psychosocial support. UNHCR, conversely, operates as the normative anchor of the network, providing institutional legitimacy and ensuring alignment with international refugee protection frameworks. This functional differentiation between INGO-as-implementer and INGO-as-legitimater represents a novel conceptual contribution that complements existing literature on multi-actor humanitarian governance.

Third, Lebanon constitutes a theoretically productive critical case for examining TAN effectiveness under conditions of legal ambiguity and state fragility. As a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention with a deliberately non-integrationist refugee policy, Lebanon represents an environment in which formal national legal protections for refugees are structurally absent. The relative effectiveness of the Save the Children–UNHCR partnership in this context suggests that TANs can generate quasi-institutional protective functions in the vacuum left by state non-compliance—a finding with significant implications for scholarship on humanitarian governance, the localization of aid, and the governance of protracted refugee crises. It also suggests that the boomerang pattern may be accompanied by a parallel process of norm internalization at the sub-state, community level, even when the central state remains resistant to formal normative adoption.

At the same time, this study acknowledges the structural limitations that constrain TAN effectiveness in fragile state contexts. Funding dependency, bureaucratic coordination challenges, Lebanon's ongoing economic collapse, and recurrent political crises—most acutely illustrated by the 2020 Beirut port explosion—represent persistent barriers to sustained programmatic impact. These constraints indicate that transnational advocacy networks, however sophisticated their design, remain vulnerable to macro-level political and economic shocks that lie beyond their normative influence. Future research should therefore examine the conditions under which TANs can maintain institutional resilience in protracted crises, as well as the mechanisms through which normative gains at the community level can be translated into durable legal and policy reforms at the state level.

In conclusion, the collaboration between Save the Children and UNHCR in Lebanon offers a theoretically generative case for advancing scholarship on Transnational Advocacy Networks, humanitarian governance, and the operationalization of international norms. By demonstrating how global principles can be embedded in local practice through sustained implementation-oriented partnerships, this study extends TAN theory beyond its original advocacy focus and contributes to broader debates on the role of non-state actors in constructing protective environments for the world's most vulnerable populations. Ultimately, protecting refugee children is not merely a humanitarian imperative—it is a normative and institutional project that demands the kind of sustained transnational cooperation exemplified by this partnership.

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