

Refugee Self-Reliance Moving Beyond the Marketplace



Key points

- Current humanitarian programming approaches to refugee self-reliance are problematic as they tend to individualise self-reliance and focus on jobs as the 'end goal'.
- Refugees' livelihoods often operate on familial and community levels, rather than at the individual level.
- The multiple factors that enable or inhibit refugees to be self-reliant are context specific, and can only be understood by listening to refugee perspectives.
- Measuring self-reliance through indicators beyond the economic is an important part of a wider strategy to encourage holistic programming and policy.
- Many refugees find important social value in livelihoods programmes that are unrelated to economic outcomes.
- Self-reliance assistance risks becoming a justification for reducing aid rather than a meaningful contribution to refugees' livelihoods.

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Introduction

The issue of how to promote refugee self-reliance has become of eminent importance as the number of forcibly displaced people in the world rises and budgets for refugees in long-term situations of displacement shrink. Self-reliance for refugees is commonly discussed as the ability for refugees to live independently from humanitarian assistance. Many humanitarian organisations perceive refugee's livelihoods creation, often through entrepreneurship, as the main ways to foster refugee self-reliance. Yet focusing on a purely economic definition of refugee self-reliance is problematic as it does not capture the diversity of personal circumstances or the multifarious ways that refugees live without international assistance. Refugee self-reliance, livelihoods, and entrepreneurship have considerable salience – yet there remain notable gaps in understanding and supporting non-economic dimensions of refugee self-reliance. Academic and policy literature often focus on technical economic outcomes at the expense of social and political dimensions and the use of holistic measurements. This Research in Brief presents new research on refugee self-reliance and addresses areas not commonly included in current discussions. In particular, it focuses on social and cultural, practical, and programmatic aspects of refugee self-reliance. In so doing, it rethinks the concept of refugee self-reliance and aims to contribute recommendations to help achieve positive outcomes in policy and practice.

At present, there are over 65 million people forcibly displaced, including 21 million refugees. Although more than 80% of refugee crises last over 10 years, solutions for refugees are limited. In recent years fewer than 2% of refugees worldwide have been able to avail themselves of any of the 'durable solutions', i.e. return home; resettle to another safe country; or legally integrate into the host country. More than 60% of refugees reside in urban areas, where they are not usually provided with humanitarian material assistance such as food, shelter, or clothing. Instead, they are often provided with livelihoods training in areas such as tailoring, ICT, and hairdressing, and meant to become entrepreneurs, mainly in the informal economy. While such types of training can support refugees in creating livelihoods, they also have unacknowledged roles and outcomes for refugees, and their central economic focus can ignore important non-economic approaches to creating dignified lives.

Current discussions on refugee self-reliance do not generally address important questions such as: Why might non-economic aspects of refugee self-reliance be important? How do refugees themselves define self-reliance and what sort of support do they determine as most important in fostering

it? How do humanitarian organisations know if refugees are actually self-reliant? The scale of displacement today and the ongoing nature of protracted refugee situations make these and other questions critical for the future of refugee assistance. The following sections of this brief address questions that are important for policymakers, practitioners, and academics to further discuss as the search for durable solutions for refugees continues.

How do discussions of refugee self-reliance frame refugees? (And why does this matter?)

Ulrike Krause

Debates about refugee self-reliance are not new; on the contrary, political and humanitarian actors have been discussing means and interventions to promote refugees' self-reliance for decades. Humanitarian institutions – UNHCR especially – have conceptualized a number of approaches such as livelihoods and empowerment projects, most recently with a focus on resilience, to overcome refugees' treatment as vulnerable, passive 'aid beneficiaries'. These approaches seek to portray refugees as resourceful actors capable of becoming self-reliant.

The changing humanitarian perspective of refugees from helpless victims to creative actors is crucial but often presents a binary of refugee vulnerability and self-reliance. This is created as refugees are presented as requiring external support to become self-reliant due to their vulnerabilities. **By holding on to the concept of refugee vulnerability, humanitarian actors essentially create and oppose vulnerable versus self-reliant groups of refugees. In so doing, they neglect the great diversity of refugees' actions beyond humanitarian boundaries.**

By defining refugees as actors in self-reliance projects, humanitarian organisations also transfer prime responsibility to refugees; they are thus made liable for becoming self-reliant and supporting themselves in humanitarian terms. This has far-reaching consequences; one is that humanitarian actors can ultimately provide less assistance. In this sense, **self-reliance risks becoming a political tool to reduce aid.** Yet, often at the same time, a lack of economic opportunities, inequalities, discrimination, and violence remain unacknowledged or even accepted enduring circumstances. Such conditions become the backdrop of self-reliance projects as attention is placed on refugees' adaptation to these situations instead of wider efforts to improve them.

While the fundamental idea of promoting refugees' self-reliance is important, especially in protracted situations, **political and humanitarian actors should let go of the opposing idea of vulnerable versus self-reliant refugees as a person can be vulnerable to issues but at the same time be self-reliant in other ways** (e.g. women can be vulnerable to sexual violence but self-reliant in their livelihoods). The concept of self-reliance should not be misused as a political tool for providing less aid or for accepting problematic living conditions. If impoverished circumstances persist, refugees



A Congolese baker at the refugee-led organisation Bondeko Centre in Kampala, Uganda. Credit: Evan Easton-Calabria.

are unlikely to be able to rely on themselves but will likely stay in a state of destitution over years. In addition to providing livelihoods projects for refugees, humanitarian and political actors should address the systemic issues, such as barriers to work or a lack of legal representation, that create challenging work and living conditions for refugees.

What are important aspects of refugee self-reliance beyond the economic?

Jessica Field, Anubhav Tiwari and Yamini Mookherjee

A further problematic aspect of current humanitarian programming approaches to refugee self-reliance is the tendency to individualise self-reliance and focus on supporting every working-age adult into employment – often viewing individual jobs as an 'end goal' marker of self-reliance. This approach fails to consider refugee interdependencies – which are highly gendered – as well as the myriad of non-economic ways that refugees seek to make meaningful lives.

For instance, current efforts to support urban refugee self-reliance in Delhi, India, are driven by ideas of jobs and the market as an antidote to aid dependence and a durable solution for refugee displacement. However, urban refugees in India are largely restricted to working in the informal economy, which is insecure, exploitative, and low-skilled. Many Afghan refugees residing in Delhi, for instance, have a high level of education and professional skill-sets. However, they cannot translate these into secure, meaningful work, as most Indian employers do not recognise their Refugee Cards and Long Term Visas as valid documentation. Refugees also struggle to open bank accounts – a requisite for formal sector employment – due to unrecognised documentation, or a lack thereof.

Aid programming also does not often duly consider the importance of gender when devising livelihoods programmes. Rohingya women refugees in Delhi, for example, undertake most of the child-rearing and caregiving responsibilities in the community. Programming designed to support them to

pursue wage-labour activities outside of the home, or home-based enterprise within their communities, risks exacerbating the 'double burden' of women shouldering the responsibility of work and caregiving – particularly as these responsibilities are then not recognised as productive activities essential for individual and community well-being. Women should not of course be perceived or treated as 'natural' caregivers, but childcare and domestic work should be recognised as productive contributions to the interdependent 'self-reliance' of a family and community, regardless of which gender takes responsibility. **Family and community self-reliance rests on the interconnected public and private activities that enable a group to 'get on' without substantial external aid** rather than the ability of each individual in a given refugee group to maximise their earning potential.

Aid organisations programming for 'self-reliance' should take a broader look at refugee well-being and factor in the non-economic – and non-individualistic – components of living a fulfilling and meaningful life. These include aspects of life such as family caregiving, leisure opportunities, and voluntary work. It is only through understanding livelihoods as constituent parts of refugee well-being, rather than end goals, that humanitarian organisations can more effectively support refugees to convert places, services and opportunities into aspects of life they have reason to value.

How do refugees define self-reliance? Integrating the perspective of refugees: self-reliance as networked support

Caitlin Wake, Veronique Barbelet

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) recently completed a two-year study on refugee livelihoods in protracted displacement, including case studies in Cameroon, Jordan, Malaysia and Turkey. A complex story of self-reliance emerged from the perspectives of refugees who participated in this research. Across the case studies, 'self-reliance' was generally comprised of multiple sources of support from a wide range of individuals, transnational networks, and formal and informal institutions. Indeed, rather than 'self-reliance', refugee livelihoods depended on various forms of interpersonal, monetary, and in-kind support that changed over the course of displacement based on both need and resource availability.

The multiple, interconnected factors that comprise refugee livelihoods and enable or inhibit refugees from being 'self' reliant are context specific, and can only be understood by listening to the perspectives of refugees. Yet HPG's recent research illustrates how aid actors continue to fail to effectively integrate the perspectives of refugees. While the study found that **aid actors and government authorities often understand the livelihood challenges refugees face, this knowledge is rarely used in programming and policy**, and resultant top-down approaches

prevail – despite a lack of success. This matters because in not integrating the perspectives of refugees, or a nuanced understanding of refugees' self-reliance, aid agencies often miss opportunities to support and complement refugees' own livelihood strategies.

The prevailing discourse of individualistic self-reliance is countered by empirical evidence from multiple case studies (see further reading). In Cameroon for instance, one Central African village chief has moved his entire village across the border to east Cameroon. To enable individuals in his village to support themselves, the Central African village chief went from village to village in east Cameroon until he was able to negotiate with a chief for his whole village to move. The Cameroonian village chief made land available for Central African refugees to build houses and farm. This exemplifies how **refugees' livelihoods often operate on familial and community levels, rather than at an individual level.**

Another example provides further evidence of the multidimensional support and strategies used by refugees to support themselves. A young Central African woman in Cameroon explained that she relies on numerous strategies and sources of support: her family is hosted by her mother's Cameroonian in laws; the young woman in turn supports her family by selling doughnuts at the markets through buying flour at credit thanks to the charity of local Cameroonian traders; and at the same time, the family continues to seek food assistance from the World Food Programme, paying for transport to the distribution site every month in the hope that their name will be on the distribution list.

A third and final example illustrates the role of refugee community-based organisations (CBOs) in supporting the livelihoods of refugees. In Malaysia, a country where it is illegal for refugees to work and most refugees receive no formal assistance, CBOs provide a broad range of services (such as education, shelter, and assistance) as well as livelihood support (such as channelling donations to vulnerable refugees and connecting unemployed refugees with



A Rohingya man teaches English to Rohingya children in Malaysia. Credit: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

employers). **The protection and assistance roles played by refugee communities should not be underestimated, nor should they be accepted as an unqualified good:** it cannot be assumed that the work of CBOs and their refugee members signifies community solidarity or self-sufficiency, as notable challenges include inadequate resources, mistrust and alleged corruption. Nevertheless, Rohingya CBOs constitute an important form of community self-organisation, assistance and protection in Malaysia, and contribute to a broader, more community-based understanding of self-reliance.

To effectively integrate the perspectives of refugees and how their livelihoods rely on networked support, aid agencies do not simply need to become better at gathering these perspectives and using them to inform the design of interventions. **A complete re-definition of what is meant by livelihoods or 'self-reliance' interventions should be considered.** Current interventions are designed around supply-driven models: where there is a need or a gap, interventions aim to fill the gap by creating jobs, providing vocational training or extending micro-credit. Instead, **livelihood interventions should be based on the analysis of obstacles that refugees face in their own strategies and actions, as well as an examination of the roles and functions of the networked support refugees receive.** If this were taken into account, livelihood interventions could then become the set of actions that help remove barriers faced by refugees in a complementary manner with already existing support. Critical to this is bringing together a coalition of the willing – those such as policymakers, humanitarians, host government officials, and refugees who are already supporting and positively shaping the livelihoods outcomes for refugees – with the recognition that coalitions will be different in each context.

What are some non-economic outcomes and benefits of livelihoods and self-reliance programmes for refugees?

Estella Carpi

Halba, the capital of the Akkar governorate in northern Lebanon, has been one of the main destinations for Syrian refugees since 2011. Research undertaken in Halba found that some segments of the refugee population perceive – despite humanitarian intentions – livelihood programmes as leisure activities instead of a realistic way to create a livelihood. Interviews with Lebanese and Syrian women who attended a chocolate-making workshop found that **beneficiaries' expectations of the livelihood programme were diverse and related to their social status in Lebanon.** Such expectations ranged from locals' interest or desperate need to find a job, to refugees approaching the workshop as a mere leisure activity due to the awareness that the host economy will not employ all of the refugee workforce, and that legal constraints will socially limit their lives in Lebanon.



Chocolate-making at the Halba chocolate-making workshop. Credit: Estella Carpi. Halba Akkar Network for Development Workshop.

Refugees referred to livelihood programmes as a way to meet other people, to avoid being locked in the house all the time, and to find new ways to occupy themselves. However, unemployment was the main pull factor that encouraged local residents to participate, as all of the Lebanese women who attended the workshop had worked in the past but lost their job for different reasons. For these local women, humanitarian agencies were perceived akin to temp agencies.

One explanation for the difference in refugee and local perspectives on livelihoods training in Halba is the fact that **livelihood programmes in the region have scarce economic impact on local labour markets.** This may be in part because **training and apprenticeships rarely entail a follow-up stage.** Most of the interviewed beneficiaries were instead left on their own after participating in a livelihood programme despite desiring further support.

While livelihoods training offers important **leisure and community spaces for refugees and vulnerable local populations,** this **unintentional outcome** is considered to be a failure from a humanitarian perspective, as it does not lead to the intended and originally planned result. Given the positive social values that livelihoods training can have in refugees' lives, there is a need to acknowledge and further incorporate these into humanitarian planning, and allow refugees to approach such programmes in an independent and subjective way (i.e. either as a leisure activity or to fill actual market gaps and find concrete job opportunities). To further support their original aim, humanitarian agencies should seek to provide spaces that enable refugees and vulnerable people to apply their acquired skills and, if possible, sell goods such as food and apparel. In addressing these various aspects of well-being simultaneously, the humanitarian system might begin to **rethink leisure and livelihoods enhancement as constructive parts of the same strategy to better human life, and plan further programmes accordingly.**

How do we measure refugee self-reliance?

Amy Slaughter, Kellie Leeson

Although self-reliance has been promoted as a major assistance strategy for refugees in recent years, there have been limited attempts to rigorously measure it. This has practical and academic implications, as **studies on refugee self-reliance use varying and often imprecise indicators, meaning it is impossible to compare the success of refugee self-reliance** across contexts and strategies. Instead, most humanitarian work is measured according to specific sectoral outputs or outcomes over the course of a six-month or one-year project cycle. **While self-reliance is often highlighted as a priority, few, if any, agencies are held to this goal, and this is in large part because self-reliance is not measured.**

Noting this gap, RefugePoint and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) convened a global Community of Practice of over 15 organisations¹ to collectively engage with this issue. Building on tools such as the Vulnerability Assessment Framework, UNHCR's livelihoods indicators, Samuel Hall's Multi-Dimensional Integration Index, the Joint IDP Profiling Service indicator library, RefugePoint's Self-Reliance Measurement Tool, WRC's Well-Being and Adjustment Index, along with other tools, the Community of Practice was able to agree on a common definition for self-reliance, self-reliance principles, and indicative domains that would allow tracking of a refugee household's journey toward self-reliance. Expanding on UNHCR's definition, it defines refugee self-reliance as 'the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet its essential needs in a sustainable manner.' The draft refugee self-reliance measurement tool that the Community of Practice is currently developing includes **eleven indicators: income, employment, access to shelter, food, WASH, education, health, community involvement, safety, legal status, and well-being.**

In creating the new common indicators, lessons are being drawn from the WRC's previous creation and piloting of its Well-Being and Adjustment Index. The WRC followed a six-step process of developing and modifying the Index and then piloted it to refugee households with seven organisations in three countries over 18 months. Interested organisations integrated the tool into their case management of households, and data were collected using both paper-pencil and tablets during face-to-face interviews. The longitudinal data from those settings demonstrates that **a simple and practical tool used by operational humanitarian organisations can measure the progress of refugees toward self-reliance.**

Lessons are also being drawn from the Self-Reliance Measurement Tool created by RefugePoint. For the past 12 years, the agency has tested and honed new service models with a diverse array of urban refugees in Nairobi, originating from Congo, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and Burundi. Drawing on successful models for resettling and integrating refugees in the United States, RefugePoint developed an intensive case management and 'one stop shop' approach that ensures both coordination of services and a single point of accountability for outcomes. The goal of



Jewellery and goods made by East African refugees in Kampala, Uganda. Credit: Evan Easton-Calabria.

the program is to identify refugees in Nairobi who are most in need of assistance, provide them the support and services they need to stabilise, and then work with them to develop a gainful livelihood and become self-reliant. **The Self-Reliance Measurement Tool enabled both the targeting of clients eligible for services at the front end, and the measuring of progress toward and achievement of self-reliance at the back end.** Through a scoring and threshold approach to measuring self-reliance, RefugePoint has been able to 'graduate' nearly 2,000 refugees from its services in the past two years after the refugees established livelihoods that enabled them to cover their basic needs and scored highly on domains of holistic stability and well-being. The evidence provided by the measurement tool has allowed RefugePoint to better detect weaknesses in its service model as well as changes in the host environment that impact on refugee outcomes.

Conclusion

The case studies and discussions in this brief demonstrate the ability to define refugee self-reliance in a way that incorporates economic, social, and individual aspects as well as broader structural contexts that impede or promote the attainment of self-reliance. A corresponding ability to measure it using simple indicators presents a further opportunity to reframe assistance around holistic self-reliance. Refugees themselves indicate they want to be self-reliant and request support to build independent lives in their host countries, whether temporary or permanent. In order to support them in this goal, organisations must understand what self-reliance looks like for the refugees they work with as well as know when it has been achieved. Expanding the definition of refugee self-reliance beyond the economic and measuring self-reliance are important parts of a strategy to encourage holistic programming and policy with a realistic view of the long-term and out-of-camp nature of the current refugee crisis.

Recommendations

- The focus of livelihoods aid programming should shift from looking at jobs as the markers of individual self-reliance to an approach that considers values and capabilities, i.e. the real opportunities a person has to achieve the kind of life they value.
- Refugee well-being and the non-economic – and non-individualistic – components of living a fulfilling and meaningful life should be incorporated into the definition of refugee self-reliance.
- Livelihood interventions should be based on an analysis of obstacles that refugees face in their own strategies and actions, and an examination of the roles and functions of the networked support refugees receive.
- Refugee self-reliance assistance should constitute interlinked projects that address the social, political, and economic needs of refugees.
- Humanitarian and political actors should address the systemic issues, such as barriers to work or a lack of legal representation, that create challenging work and living conditions for refugees.



Community empowerment project sponsored by UNHCR in Kambia, Sierra Leone. Credit: Claudena Skran.

Endnote

¹ Danish Refugee Council, the IKEA Foundation, International Rescue Committee, the Joint IDP Profiling Service, Mercy Corps, Oxford Refugee Studies Centre, RefugePoint, Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat, Samuel Hall, Solutions Alliance, Trickle Up, UNHCR, US State Department/PRM, the West Asia and North Africa Institute, and the Women's Refugee Commission.

Further reading

Barbelet, V. and Wake, C. (2017) *Livelihoods in displacement: From refugee perspectives to aid agency responses*. London: Humanitarian Policy Group.

Easton-Calabria, E. (2014) 'Innovation and refugee livelihoods: a historical perspective'. *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 47, September.

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Cover photo: Refugee-led sewing and tailoring workshop, Kampala, Uganda.
 Credit: Evan Easton-Calabria.