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A Conceptual Framework for
Understanding and Measuring
Refugee Self-Reliance

"Better Lives Now: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding and Measuring Refugee Self-Reliance"
by Kellie C. Leeson, Amy Slaughter, Dale Buscher

Abstract

While refugee self-reliance is not a new concept, establishing systematic criteria for measuring it is a new effort. In 2016, RefugePoint and the Women's Refugee Commission brought together a community of practice to explore this topic and develop a universal measurement tool, the Self-Reliance Index. This paper will explore the challenges of measuring refugee self-reliance along with the literature and conceptual framework of self-reliance that underpins the development of this Index. It will further examine some of the concerns that have been raised related to self-reliance and will chart recent progress and signs of momentum in expanding opportunities for refugee self-reliance globally.

INTRODUCTION

The self-reliance of refugees is a policy objective that is as old as the international refugee regime itself, though one that has been pursued with varying vigor over the years and has undergone evolutions in its application.[1]
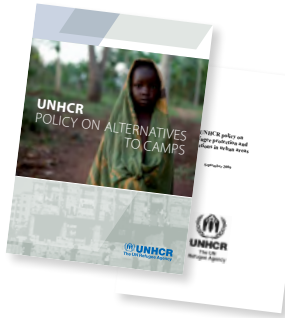
UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas

and

UNHCR Policy on Alternatives to Camps

A combination of trends emerging in the past decade have brought a resurgence of interest in self-reliance as a policy objective and programmatic priority in refugee response. Over the last several decades, refugee numbers have increased as conflict situations have become increasingly protracted, decreasing opportunities for safe returns along with limited legal local integration and third country resettlement.[2] While these three durable solutions are available to only a sliver of the global refugee population, millions more are provided either minimal or insufficient assistance to sustain them while in exile. Humanitarian agencies report that many refugees express interest in the opportunity to enter the workforce, continue their education and become part of their host communities.

Increasingly urban and protracted refugee populations have compelled governments, NGOs and UNHCR to rethink their approach to refugee response. UNHCR published the _UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas_ in 2009 and _Policy on Alternatives to Camps_ in 2014. These policies provided space and cover to explore new ways of working with refugees, however the confines of the humanitarian infrastructure, short term funding and sectoral responses (e.g. health, education, etc.), and restrictive policy environments limited progress. In 2016, over 25 organizations came together to address the gap in understanding of refugee self-reliance starting with building evidence to measure its incremental achievement.

[1]   Skran, C., & Easton-Calabria, E. (2020). Old Concepts Making New History: Refugee Self-reliance, Livelihoods and the 'Refugee Entrepreneur.' Journal of Refugee Studies, 33(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez061

[2]   UNGA (UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY) (2018). Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Part II Global compact on refugees, General Assembly Official Records, Seventy-third Session Supplement No. 12. https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf
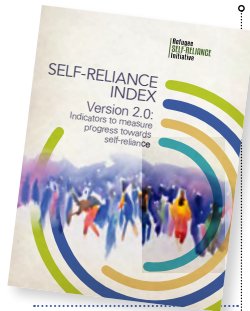
The Self-Reliance Index (SRI)

The [Self-Reliance Index](#) (SRI), a tool to measure self-reliance, was created to be a holistic measure of household-level change over time. Today the SRI is being used around the world, and the contexts of its use vary greatly, demonstrating the broad utility of the tool. For example, it is being used by the Danish Refugee Council in Lebanon to support an economic recovery program. Sitti Social Enterprise is using the SRI in the Palestinian Jerash Camp in Jordan to measure the impact of a skills-building and small enterprise program. In Colombia, Bethany Christian Services used the SRI in their work with vulnerable refugee and host families with a focus on the provision of rent support and basic services. Several of the [Poverty Alleviation Coalition](#) members use the SRI with minor additions to measure their graduation programs. In addition, IGAD countries have expressed interest in learning how it could be used to establish country-wide baselines on the level of self-reliance among their refugee populations. Beyond these operational uses of the SRI, many of those who have downloaded the SRI

have used it as a research or reference tool to inform their thinking about self-reliance. In this way, its reach goes well beyond program strengthening and into areas of policy, systems, and funding influence. Given these diverse uses, this paper aims to outline the conceptual framework of self-reliance that underpins the Self-Reliance Index (SRI), the limitations of self-reliance and the opportunities for supporting refugee self-reliance in the ever evolving context of displacement.

Context

Global displacement has more than doubled in the past decade, with 89.3 million people forcibly displaced at the end of 2021, including over 27 million refugees.[3] Current numbers are even higher given the Ukraine conflict. Low and middle income countries host 83% of the world's displaced.[4] In addition, 60% of people who are displaced find themselves in cities, with varying degrees of access to the opportunities and services they offer.[5,6,7,8,9] In 2020, the three durable solutions for refugees - voluntary

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[3]   UNHCR (2021). Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2021.

[4]   Ibid.

[5]   Women's Refugee Commission (2014). Double-edged Sword: Livelihoods in Emergencies.

[6]   Women's Refugee Commission (2011). Dawn in the City: Guidance for Achieving Self-Reliance for Urban Refugees.

[7]   Women's Refugee Commission (2011). No Place to Go but Up: Urban Refugees in Johannesburg, South Africa.

[8]   Women's Refugee Commission (2011). Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Refugees Struggle to Make a Living in New Delhi.

[9]   Women's Refugee Commission (2011). The Living Ain't Easy: Urban Refugees in Kampala.

repatriation in safety and dignity, permanent resettlement to a safe country, or legal integration into the country of first asylum - remained limited with less than 2% of all refugees accessing a solution. Over the last ten years, only 3.9 million people secured long term solutions, whereas in the 1990s, the number surpassed 15 million, largely due to repatriation opportunities.[10] As a result, 77% of refugees now find themselves in a protracted situation living in unstable conditions with limited assistance or access to opportunities, and at times, frequently changing and confusing residency and employment rules.[11]

Growing Momentum

Self-reliance, while not new, has vacillated in the attention and focus it has received over the years. Livelihood programs, a potential cornerstone for self-reliance, were typically designed and implemented as a means to assist refugees to learn new skills and/or earn small amounts of income to supplement their food rations and other in-kind humanitarian aid. UNHCR published a self-reliance handbook in 2005 asserting that, "...self-reliance is an integral and underpinning part of any durable solution (its design, development and implementation),... It is unlikely to be achieved fully in a refugee operation but is something to work towards progressively".[12]

In spite of vocational training and livelihoods programs, refugees would repeatedly voice that they needed jobs and income, especially as increasing numbers of refugees moved to cities where little if any aid was available.[13] Refugees themselves were interested in rebuilding their lives but most refugee support programs were not established with that goal in mind, but rather with the goals of protection and basic needs assistance. In part this is due to legal limitations, as urban refugees are often not legally recognized by the host country, leading to a precarious legal position not just for refugees but for the agencies assisting them, particularly with activities that appear to support integration outcomes. In response to pressure from refugees and within the humanitarian community, in 2009, UNHCR published a significantly revised urban refugee policy, a remarkable break from the past in its acceptance of refugees living in cities and the role of UNHCR in supporting these urban populations.[14]

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[10] UNHCR (2020). Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2020.

[11] Ibid.

[12] UNHCR (2005). UNHCR Handbook for Self-Reliance. Book 2.

[13] Women's Refugee Commission (2011). Dawn in the City: Guidance for Achieving Urban Refugee Self-Reliance.

[14] UNHCR (2009). UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas.

Global Compact on Refugees

In 2018, the Global Compact on Refugees – the first global policy to elevate the self-reliance of refugees as a core aim – was affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly.[15] The more operationally-focused Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework provided signatory countries with multilateral donor support to advance refugee rights within their countries including the freedom of movement and the right to work .[16] The 2019 Global Refugee Forum, a pledging and stocktaking forum on implementation of the Global Compact for Refugees, resulted in some 1,400 pledges by donors, hosting governments, private sector companies, and non-governmental organizations. While pledges do not align to the four overarching goals of the Compact, 128 of the pledges relate specifically to jobs and livelihoods for refugees covering everything from the recognition of degrees and certificates, to financial inclusion, job creation and program funding support, while many others relate to inclusive policies most notably in education and health access, all components of self-reliance.[17] These changes in the policy and operating environment indicate a sea-change in how refugees' self-reliance is viewed and prioritized.

Measuring self-reliance

Given the changing nature of displacement – increasingly urban and protracted – and the growing sense that refugee self-reliance is a critical component of refugee response in many contexts, RefugePoint (RP) and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) began prioritizing its measurement in order to know when and how self-reliance was achieved or increased. This knowledge could strategically inform program design and resource allocation. Based on their initial independent work, the two organizations brought together a community of practice to deepen the humanitarian community's understanding of self-reliance and collective action toward facilitating it, starting with the development of a common tool to measure refugee self-reliance.

The Self-Reliance Index (SRI) was developed as an easy-to-use tool to measure whether a household is sustainably meeting its basic needs over time. It was agreed that the tool should aim for simplicity to facilitate practitioner use and employ language that is universal for global application, while allowing for local contextualization. Typical refugee and humanitarian

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[15] UNGA (UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY). (2018). Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Part II Global compact on refugees, General Assembly Official Records, Seventy-third Session Supplement No. 12.

[16] Crawford, N., & O'Callaghan, S. (2019). The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework: Responsibility-sharing and self-reliance in East Africa. ODI.

[17] UNHCR (2019). Outcomes of the Global Refugee Forum: 2019.

interventions are sectoral in nature (health, food, WASH, etc.).[18,19] The SRI aims to provide a common platform to capture the supportive inputs across all sectors and provided by different actors (NGOs, UNHCR, governments, etc.), to identify the areas in which refugees are faring well, and to pinpoint remaining gaps for targeting the limited support available. In electing to develop a simple, multi-sectoral tool, the development team recognized the implicit trade-offs. Many sectors, such as food and health, have well-established, comprehensive measurement tools that are accepted as the industry standard for those sectors. The SRI does not replace those tools and may be used in conjunction with them for agencies requiring greater detail for their particular intervention or may be used as a standalone tool when a broad overview of a household's circumstances is desired. The tool was developed primarily to assist practitioners to better serve the needs of their clients, ideally through a case management approach involving cross-sectoral interventions, though many other uses were also envisioned and have materialized.

Creating the Self-Reliance Index

The SRI was developed through an inclusive and iterative process that is on-going. The initial stages of the SRI development included a literature review, community of practice convening, expert input and testing, and finally a pilot phase of the SRI 1.0 before the global launch of the SRI 2.0 in May 2020.

The initial community of practice convening of 2017 included 13 organizations with over 20 practitioner participants including diverse actors such as UNHCR, Mercy Corps and the Oxford Refugee Studies Center. The convening was led by RP and WRC. The participants interrogated commonly used definitions for self-reliance such as the definitions used by UNHCR, the US State Department, and the Hunger Project to arrive at a definition that was agreed as the standard for the community. Based on the agreed definition ("Self-reliance is the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet their essential needs in a sustainable manner.") and after reviewing existing tools such as RefugePoint's Self-Reliance Measurement Tool,

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18   Leeson, K., Bhandari, P. B., Myers, A., & Buscher, D. (2020). Measuring the Self-Reliance of Refugees. Journal of Refugee Studies, 33(1), 86–106.

19   Slaughter, A. G. (2020). Fostering Refugee Self-reliance: A Case Study of an Agency's Approach in Nairobi. Journal of Refugee Studies, 33(1), 107–124.

WRC's Well-Being and Adjustment Index, the Vulnerability Assessment Framework and other related tools,[20] the participants agreed on the components necessary to measure this concept. The initial list of components based on both published and practitioner reports included: income, employment, shelter, food/nutrition, health care, education, community involvement, safety/protection (including access to information), water and sanitation, and psychosocial well-being/hope for the future. By the end of the workshop there was general agreement on all of the components except for water and sanitation, with many participants of the opinion that these should be subsumed under the concept of adequate shelter. In addition, consensus could not be reached in regards to the psychosocial well-being/hope for the future component due to the concept being more subjective, harder to measure, and impossible to aggregate at the case level, though this component was kept in initially and tested. The full workshop report is available on the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative Website.[21]

Based on this foundation, the tool was refined with the assistance and input of over 40 academic and practitioner partners. The resulting tool was then pre-tested with input from 92 trained staff members, 103 refugee home visits, 6 focus groups, as well as 18 refugee and 14 staff key informant semi-structured interviews inclusive of academic partner oversight and support. The pre-test phase corroborated the working definition of self-reliance and key domains, while challenging areas in need of further consideration such as psychosocial well-being, social capital, and adult education opportunities. The SRI was revised to address the feedback received and was further piloted from November 2018 to May 2019 in three countries: Irbid, Mafraq and Amman, Jordan; Nairobi, Kenya; and Palenque and Tenosique, Mexico, with partner agencies Danish Refugee Council, RefugePoint and Asylum Access respectively. This phase, supervised by Academic Advisors Lindsay Stark and Ilana Seff, focused on empirically driven efforts to ensure that the SRI findings matched the realities of refugee households and the likelihood of reliable practitioner implementation. The final soft-launch phase from August 2019 to January 2020 focused on further tool and score refinement, as well as reliability and validity testing, the report of which was published in the journal *Conflict and Health*.
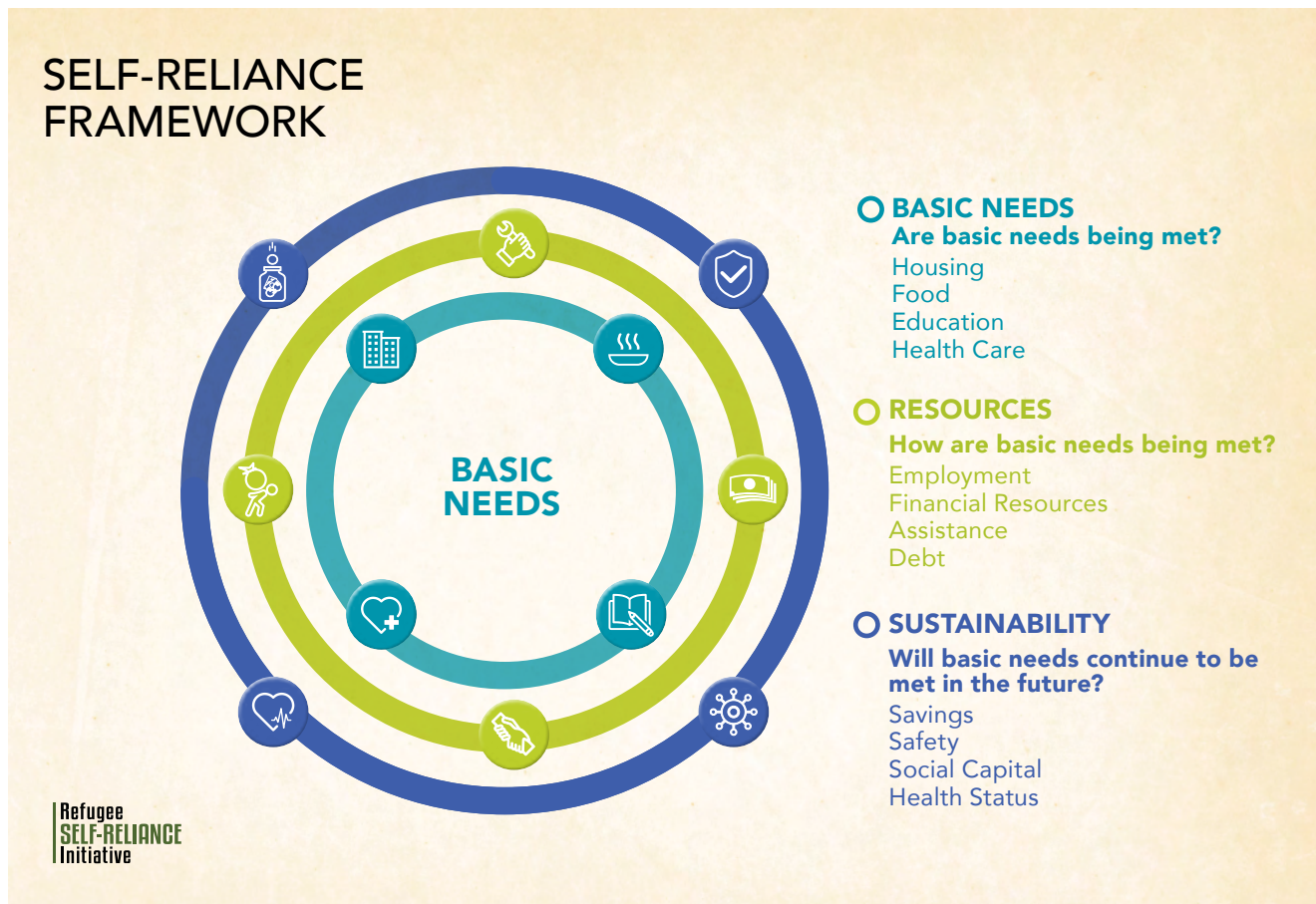
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20   Additional tools reviewed included: UNHCR's Heightened Risk Interview Tool; JIPS' Library of Durable Solutions Indicators; UNHCR-Ecuador's Integration Index; the Multidimensional Integration Index used in Afghanistan; the Refugee Family Progress Assessment used by IRC in Utah; the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees tool (VASyR); and the Vulnerability Scorecard used by UNHCR in Niger.

21   Seff, I., Leeson, K. & Stark, L. Measuring self-reliance among refugee and internally displaced households: the development of an index in humanitarian settings. *Conflict Health* 15, 56 (2021).

Conceptual Framework

Based on the iterative testing process described above, the Self-Reliance Index 2.0 now includes twelve domains, with four domains focused on a household's ability to meet its **BASIC NEEDS** (Housing, Food, Education and Health Care). The next four domains – Employment, Financial Resources, Assistance and Debt – focus on the **RESOURCES** needed to secure basic needs and factors that either insulate these critical needs or imperil them. The final four domains – Savings, Safety, Social Capital, and Health Status – are indicators of **SUSTAINABILITY**. They measure conditions and assets that may allow refugees to weather shocks, increasing the likelihood that they will be able to continue meeting their basic needs in the future.

FIGURE 1. Self-Reliance Framework

SELF-RELIANCE FRAMEWORK

BASIC NEEDS

BASIC NEEDS
Are basic needs being met?
Housing
Food
Education
Health Care

RESOURCES
How are basic needs being met?
Employment
Financial Resources
Assistance
Debt

SUSTAINABILITY
Will basic needs continue to be met in the future?
Savings
Safety
Social Capital
Health Status

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As reflected in Figure 1, which serves as a conceptual framework for self-reliance broadly and after which the SRI is patterned, at the core are the basic needs central to all human life. Often humanitarian response ends at addressing these basic needs. Increasing self-reliance requires moving beyond meeting the most basic needs (center circle) to understanding the resources available (or not) to a household to furnish its basic needs (middle ring), and finally, understanding how safety and social capital, as well as assets such as savings and health, either enable or impede a household to sustainably meet its basic needs (outer ring).

The SRI development process manifested a constant tension between including the fewest domains possible to ensure ease of use, while capturing sufficient information to gain a solid understanding of self-reliance. This required setting aside household information (however important) that was deemed peripheral to that understanding. Creating a universal tool also required language that was broad and flexible. The SRI training curriculum and user guide recommend that implementers first agree on a common understanding of response options based on their local context, especially vis-a-vis housing, food, education and health care. As an example, pre-school is mandatory from the age of four in Mexico while in Jordan school age

SRI User Guide

begins at six. Housing options also vary greatly by location. A challenge in creating the SRI was to ensure that it was written in a way that allows for this local contextualization.

As described above, while the SRI captures the holistic needs of a household, it also captures the resources available for each household to attend to these needs, and the middle ring reflects these resources. These domains were the most significantly adjusted in the course of the testing process based on the feedback and lived experiences of refugees. Interviews revealed the challenges faced by many refugee households to meet their health care and housing costs. These challenges then result in refugees developing complex and sometimes dangerous coping mechanisms to address their needs. It was important to build the tool to adequately capture this complexity.

It might at first glance seem counterintuitive that Assistance and Debt are included among the Resources domains or that they are included in a self-reliance measurement tool at all, since both are forms of external help. In designing the tool, an early decision was made that it should measure both standard of living and self-reliance (that is, how the standard of living is afforded). If the SRI only told us that a family was self-reliant in terms of receiving no external aid

but not whether its standard of living was adequate, the finding would be meaningless. That is, the goal is not for people living in poverty and privation to be considered self-reliant simply because they receive no aid. That could not be considered a positive outcome and does not track the definition of self-reliance agreed upon. It is therefore important to measure both whether basic needs are being met and *how* they are being met. Assistance and debt are often important means of meeting basic needs while a family progresses towards self-reliance. It is precisely this progression that the tool measures.

The domains in the outer ring facilitate or limit the sustainability of a household meeting its basic needs. Early versions of the tool contained a domain that aimed to understand aspects of mental health, whether framed as psychosocial well-being, hope for the future, or self-perception of circumstances (many variations were tried). In testing the SRI, these concepts proved difficult and unreliable to measure, yielding information that was not actionable or even trusted. What is more, given the varying experiences among family members, it was not possible to extrapolate an aggregate answer for an entire household. It was also found that asking questions about their future outlook left some respondents feeling depressed and distressed, which did not comport with the "do no harm" principle.

Each of the domains underwent extensive testing, iteration and modification. Domains that proved overly challenging to measure, such as psychosocial well-being, were ultimately dropped while others, such as water and sanitation, were not included as standalone domains as the information was captured through another domain (in this case housing), and/or were deemed not essential to understanding self-reliance. The twelve domains that ultimately comprise the Self-Reliance Index 2.0 are those that gained the greatest consensus from the broad base of practitioner and refugee stakeholders who provided input into the development process and that then demonstrated high levels of validity and reliability during testing.

Each domain contains response options that correspond on the backend to a score from one to five, one being the lowest level of self-reliance and five the highest. Individual domain scores may be used to flag needs requiring targeted interventions, while the aggregate score of all domains comprises the "index" that gauges the household's overall level of self-reliance. The aggregate score allows service providers to establish thresholds for targeting program beneficiaries, setting more objective eligibility criteria for their programs, and identifying when households have reached a level of self-reliance wherein supporting agencies can responsibly disengage.

The SRI was designed to be administered in person, and ideally in the context of home visits where observation of the household's living situation helps inform the selection of response options. Due to COVID restrictions, the SRI is being tested and administered for use over the phone. The tool was designed to be readministered with the same households at regular intervals, such as every six months, to chart change over time.

Addressing Questions and Concerns

In considering how self-reliance may be expanded, as called for in the Global Compact for Refugees, it is important to understand the reasons that self-reliance has *not* historically been pursued by the humanitarian community as a high profile or widespread goal for refugees in countries of asylum. This section will describe and address in turn four categories of concerns and critiques that emerged from the literature and in discussions around the RSRI and SRI, namely: *philosophical, tactical, operational,* and *evidentiary* concerns.

Gaining a better understanding of these concerns is essential to finding areas of solidarity among stakeholders.

Philosophical concerns

Some refugee scholars and advocates assert that the concept of self-reliance is a fallacious, neo-liberal western construct that serves the goals of capitalism and reducing humanitarian aid.[22,23] They argue that no human being (or household) can claim to be self-reliant, as we are all enmeshed in webs of social dependencies and our lives are regulated by the larger systems and circumstances that surround us. For many refugees, those circumstances include a "lack of economic opportunities, inequalities, discrimination, and violence".[24] Some argue that self-reliance is not an appropriate or achievable goal for every person and are concerned that a focus on self-reliance may further stigmatize refugees who are perceived as "dependent".[25] Critics point out that self-reliance at its best is a fluid, temporary state and that all people experience greater and lesser degrees of self-reliance throughout their lives. Furthermore, self-reliance is not neatly binary, nor should it be contrasted to "vulnerability,"

22   Easton-Calabria, E., & Omata, N. (2018). Panacea for the refugee crisis? Rethinking the promotion of 'self-reliance' for refugees, Third World Quarterly, 39:8, 1458-1474.

23   Krauss, U. (2017). How do discussions of refugee self-reliance frame refugees? (And why does this matter?), Refugee Studies Centre Research in Brief 7, Oxford: University of Oxford, October.

24   Ibid.

25   Omata, N. (2017). The Myth of Self-Reliance: Economic Lives Inside a Liberian Refugee Camp. Berghahn Books.

as it often is, since humans are all simultaneously vulnerable in some ways and self-reliant in others.[26]

The concerns cited by these scholars and advocates are keenly warranted and are essential admonitions to the humanitarian field as it increasingly eyes self-reliance approaches. While not dissenting from any of the points outlined above and recognizing the baggage that the term and concept of self-reliance carry, the authors of this paper have observed (from focus groups with refugee clients and anecdotal reports from NGO partners in various regions) that the term appears to be well-understood across languages and cultures globally. It has also gained currency in the refugee field, as evidenced by its appearance in the GCR. For these reasons and lacking a suitable alternative, the authors have chosen to adopt the admittedly problematic term "self-reliance," while heeding all of the cautionary notes voiced above.

The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI) has been careful to articulate that it supports the expansion of *opportunities* for refugees to become self-reliant. It does not endorse enforced self-reliance or withdrawal or reduction of aid in situations where it is still vitally needed. Historical examples cited of this occurring have focused

on protracted rural and camp-based contexts, sometimes in which refugee status has ceased and "residual" populations are transitioned *en masse* to "self-reliance." While these may indeed have been harmful, premature or overly-broad policy moves, these situations bear little resemblance to the contexts in which many RSRI partners are working on self-reliance. The focus of the RSRI has been primarily on urban contexts where refugees are not receiving much, if any, assistance, and have aspirations of inclusion in the local economic and social life. In these contexts, survival strategies and opportunities are more individualized, as opposed to mass policy implementation in camps.

A thread running through the critiques highlighted above is a concern that self-reliance approaches may result in less help to refugees. However, given that the focus is urban areas where little help is available now, it is expected that a greater focus on self-reliance will result in *more* help initially, as programming is expanded that frontloads support coupled with counseling and livelihoods assistance. What is more, these types of programs are likely to yield better, more sustainable outcomes than minimal, ongoing basic needs support (the SRI will allow for precisely these sorts of comparisons of program

26   Krauss, U. (2017). How do discussions of refugee self-reliance frame refugees? (And why does this matter?), Refugee Studies Centre Research in Brief 7, Oxford: University of Oxford, October.

impact). It should also be noted that, while the critiques and cautions are well taken, few alternative visions have been put forward for moving beyond the status quo of millions of refugees stuck with no solutions and little, if any, humanitarian aid.

Tactical differences

Another common critique of self-reliance approaches is that they risk letting host states off the hook for delivering on refugee rights. With this critique, there is agreement on the goal of social and economic inclusion but disagreement on the best way to get there. Many espouse a "rights first" approach, concerned that helping refugees become more self-reliant in the absence of a full spectrum of economic and social rights signals that the humanitarian community tacitly condones the host state's position or is abandoning its call for greater legal protections for refugees.

A "rights first" approach is arguably what has been tried for the past 70 years (since the signing of the 1951 Refugee Convention) and, despite decades of vigorous advocacy, has largely failed to secure better legal protections for refugees in many host countries. This approach has also entrenched an overly binary paradigm in which either durable solutions are secured or indefinite aid is provided ("care and maintenance"), without sufficient consideration of the gray

areas in between, or of how refugees may survive long-term while awaiting elusive solutions. The more pragmatic focus of self-reliance (helping refugees live better lives in the near term) is not incompatible with and indeed must complement policy-based approaches to secure basic rights and social protections for refugees. Put simply, refugee rights and self-reliance exist in a virtuous circle, with greater rights facilitating self-reliance, and self-reliance strengthening refugees' ability to claim their rights. These approaches are but different tools in a toolbox and should be used simultaneously.

It is indeed the authors' hope and expectation that better financial and social outcomes for refugees will play a role in persuading host governments of the benefits of hosting refugees and of building evidence around the positive contributions refugees make to local economies and to their new countries.

Operational and funding realities

Even where there is agreement on the goal and tactic of self-reliance, operational and funding realities have prevented broad uptake of the approach. Primary among these realities are the entrenched divisions between humanitarian and development work: different funding streams; different multilateral and government agencies involved; and different

implementing partners on the ground. Traditionally, refugees are considered the purview of humanitarian actors, while development actors are concerned with national, non-displaced populations. Concerted efforts have been made to overcome these divides and to recognize that protracted refugee situations sit at the nexus of the humanitarian and development spheres, as humanitarian aid budgets cannot sustain refugees indefinitely. While there are positive developments in this regard, including the increased engagement of the development actors in refugee solutions, progress has been slow on including refugees in development interventions.

Even within the humanitarian sphere, long-standing sector-based specializations and siloed funding streams have hindered the creation of cross-sectoral approaches. NGOs are often viewed as implementing partners of one or more specific interventions, such as livelihoods, health, nutrition, or psychosocial services. Funders typically issue calls for proposals along these same sectoral lines, allowing little latitude to design holistic, cross-cutting programs that may facilitate better outcomes.

Consider the example of an NGO that is funded for livelihoods work with urban refugees but has no discretionary funding to resolve even simple barriers that may prevent refugees from accessing these livelihood services. Such barriers could be the cost of transportation, of a business license, or of prescription medicine, for instance. Resolving more complex barriers is even further out of reach for this NGO, such as addressing instability in housing, food, childcare, etc. As a result, clients are typically deemed to be either "viable" or "vulnerable," which simply means that the viable clients need no additional help beyond livelihoods, whereas the vulnerable clients do. That is not to say that vulnerable clients will remain forever so, or that they do not simultaneously have both viable and vulnerable qualities. In fact, the same clients might move easily from the ranks of vulnerable to viable with a modest injection of tailored support.

This lack of sufficient and flexible funding has caused huge swaths of refugee communities to be missed by livelihoods programming (arguably the groups that need it the most). It has also militated against a broader understanding taking hold – by funders, policy-makers, and operational actors alike – of the positive potential of more holistic, cross-sectoral approaches. In order to expand self-reliance opportunities, as called for in the GCR, it will therefore be necessary to overcome the deep precedents of siloed funding and programming.

A joint initiative: the Center for Global Development and Refugees International

Evidentiary deficit

A final obstacle to broad uptake of self-reliance approaches has been the lack of a strong body of evidence for what works best in terms of program design, in order to replicate and scale effective approaches. The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative is intended to serve as an antidote to this evidence gap in the near term and to help fill the gap longer term. It gathers stakeholders in real time to share best practices, tools, successes, and failures. It has also outlined a collective learning agenda with the goal of answering a series of critical questions centered on the fundamentals of: what works best, with whom, where and why.

Several members of the RSRI are pursuing learning agendas through their own work, such as the new Re:Build Project, led by the International Rescue Committee and funded by the IKEA Foundation, a major goal of which is to generate learning around sustainable livelihoods approaches with refugees in east Africa to help inform the field. RefugePoint in Kenya aims to generate evidence of the impact of comprehensive programming for "vulnerable" refugees in complex urban environments that may enable them to become self-reliant

despite adversities. In addition, the Center for Global Development and Refugees International convened the Expanding Labor Market Access for Refugees and Forced Migrants group to generate evidence on the economic, social and protection effects of increasing labor market access, develop recommendations to maximize its benefits, and support efforts to mobilize private sector resources.

The evidentiary concern is expected to be greatly reduced in the next few years as results emerge from current innovations.

This section has outlined some significant barriers to the uptake of self-reliance approaches and goes some way toward explaining why these approaches have not caught hold more widely sooner. Understanding these critiques and barriers is critical to plotting the way forward if the GCR objective of expanding self-reliance is to be realized. The authors in no way claim that self-reliance is a panacea for today's refugee crises nor that it is the appropriate goal for every refugee in every situation. Rather, it may be seen as a tool in the toolbox of refugee response that can help many refugees improve the quality of their lives in the near term while striving for a durable solution.

Looking Forward

For too long the systemic, legal and environmental problems faced by refugees in countries of asylum have been the beginning and end of the conversation, leaving refugees no better off. It is possible to work on broader systemic issues and immediate quality-of-life issues at the same time. The visibility and endorsement given to self-reliance by the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) provides encouragement and policy cover for these approaches to take hold and expand. There is a surge of interest in this topic currently, as evidenced in part by the growing participation in the global Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI). The membership has grown from roughly 20 to 40 organizations over the past five years, with a marked increase in operational actors at field and headquarters levels interested in starting or expanding self-reliance programs. Related initiatives have also been established, such as the Poverty Alleviation Coalition along with the PROSPECTS Partnership, both launched in 2019 and focus on long term outcomes for the displaced. There are promising, if limited signs from several refugee-hosting governments, too, indicating a willingness to ease some of the systemic barriers to refugee self-reliance. Finally, there is significant forward momentum on the uptake of the Self-Reliance Index (SRI). At the time of this writing, 16 agencies in 24 different countries are using it across the globe in varying contexts and with varying populations and many more agencies are preparing to use it. The SRI will allow us to make educated decisions about program design and resource allocation.

The shifts toward self-reliance approaches observed above among operational agencies, host countries, donor countries and other funders are all signs of paradigm change in the refugee field. Ten years ago, it was hardly possible to have an open conversation about self-reliance in most refugee situations in countries of asylum. The lack of legal local integration opportunities was cited as an insurmountable obstacle and the conversation stopped there. Meanwhile, outside the walls of the meeting room, refugees were trying to make it on their own – many of them getting by through their own ingenuity and determination. Others needed some help to address their essential needs and eliminate barriers to pursuing livelihoods. But that help was not forthcoming. Ten years later, there is reason for optimism now that these activities are sanctioned by UNHCR and more stakeholders are pursuing them.

the Poverty Alleviation Coalition

CONCLUSION

Returning to the conceptual underpinnings of the Self-Reliance Index, capturing only the most vital of household information that tells us *most* of the story is an imperfect science.

Much detail is neglected for the sake of efficiency and ease of use. However, a tool such as the Self-Reliance Index provides humanitarian practitioners with a starting point for capturing our collective impact and a means to easily gather the necessary data to document refugee households' movement towards self-reliance over time. As we learn as a community, further iterations and new tools will, no doubt, further advance these efforts, generating further learning and evidence about the impacts of our respective programs allowing us to continually adapt and improve our services and assist refugees with rebuilding their lives.

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