From 'Burdens' to 'Benefits': Exploring Refugee-Led Humanitarian Assistance

Table of Contents

Abstract

Around the world, there is a refugee crisis. From East Africa to the Middle East to Europe, humanitarian organisations are overwhelmed with the amount of refugees in need. Yet what if the answer doesn't lie with NGOs, governments, and the United Nations – but with refugees themselves? In refugee camps and cities alike, refugees help each other through informal social networks and grassroots humanitarian organisations they have established themselves. Yet little research exists on refugee-led humanitarian assistance, and refugee-led organisations are ignored in calls for formal humanitarian partnerships. Through qualitative and quantitative research in Kampala, Uganda, and Berlin, Germany, this research aims to create the first evidence base of refugee-led assistance amongst Congolese and Syrian refugees, help transform the public perception of refugees from 'burdens' to 'benefits', and develop a humanitarian assistance model with the values of **inclusivity** and **partnership** at its core.

Introduction

When we think of leaders, we often envision heads of states or CEOs. Rarely do we think of refugees. However, refugees have the potential to lead change within their communities and provide a range of assistance activities – and many are already doing so on a small scale. This research report **presents a transformative vision for humanitarian assistance in which refugees are regarded as equal partners rather than passive recipients**. It seeks to present how new values for humanitarian assistance as well as broader society can be created. This includes the **value of partnership** in humanitarian assistance with displaced communities, as well as the **value of inclusivity** in refugee-hosting societies. I have created one of the first qualitative evidence bases of refugee-led assistance in the Global South and amongst new refugees in Europe. Through doing so, and by imagining how partnerships between refugee-led organisations and international humanitarian organisations could successfully be forged, I aim to redefine the concept of both humanitarians and refugees. **Rather than seeing refugees just as victims, could we reconsider them as contributors** to assistance and partners in sustainable solutions? **Could a bottom-up, refugee-led approach offer an alternative to the dominance of top-down aid delivery?**

Around the world, there is a refugee crisis, with more people displaced than at any time since the Second World War. The default approach is to offer humanitarian assistance to those in need – emergency food, water, shelter. However, with the average length of exile now nearly

20 years and the number of displaced people growing, approaches that enable refugees to thrive *without* international assistance is needed. Understanding the ways in which refugees themselves engage in forms of assistance, such as providing livelihoods training, education, and emergency shelter, offers an opportunity to fundamentally reconceive support for the displaced in more sustainable and empowering ways. Yet little is known of the ways that refugee communities provide assistance, nor what refugee-led initiatives might be able to offer refugees that more formalized humanitarian programmes can't.

In this research, I have examined refugee-led assistance initiatives in two refugee contexts of particular relevance and urgency: the long-term displacement of Congolese refugees in Kampala, Uganda, and the recent arrival of Syrian refugees in Berlin, Germany. This study had four major objectives, of which the latter is ongoing:

> 1) To identify the diverse forms, scope, and functions of refugee-led assistance initiatives (e.g. trauma counselling, language instruction, or micro-finance).

> 2) To understand the degree to which refugees' sources of assistance are derived from external actors or from their own community-led initiatives, and thereby help create more sustainable models of refugee assistance.

> 3) To contribute directly to capacity building by recruiting and training refugees as peer researchers, thereby enhancing their ability to identify needs within and across communities.

> 4) To influence academic, policy, and public debates on refugee agency, through stakeholder workshops (involving host governments, UNHCR, NGOs, and INGOs), academic articles, and dissemination lectures to academics and the wider public.

Even under the most constrained circumstances, refugees are not 'burdens' but instead 'benefits' to their communities. Through policy-relevant academic research, my research provides academics and policy-makers with intellectual tools to identify the opportunities this presents and the values needed to cultivate effective humanitarian assistance partnerships with refugees. The results of this research have been published in a 2018 article in the Forced Migration Review (co-authored by my research assistants Jennifer Wood and Yahya Alaous), a working paper in the Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper Series (under review), and an in-progress policy brief that will be published in English and Arabic. An academic article is also in progress.

Methods

My principal ethnographic methods were semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. My past contact with RCOs in Kampala provided a basis for my research in Uganda, and I used 'snowballing' to gain access to other RCOs and refugee-led networks. These were initially through existing contacts in Uganda which had been established through other research projects. In my fieldwork, I sought to achieve a number of different tasks; first, to map the landscape of refugee-led initiatives relating to social protection; second, to engage in several in-depth case studies of refugee-led CBOs and refugee-led networks

A key challenge of my fieldwork involved building collaborative relationships with research communities, especially with refugee-led organisations. A small number of key nodal actors served as partners, helping me to navigate the communities and attain introductions. In order to improve trust, I made repeated site visits over the course of the fieldwork period. I also trained and employed refugees from the communities I researched as peer researchers, who provided invaluable insight into our project as well as better facilitated the trust of our informants. They received training in qualitative methods, including unstructured and semi-structured interviewing, and participatory mapping. This enabled them to undertake independent follow-up ethnographic research with participant individuals, organisations, and networks over the fieldwork period.

At the end of fieldwork, peer researchers were also involved in shaping the research findings by offering feedback and sharing observations. I remain committed to sustaining these relationships over time, aware of the challenges relating to the abrupt termination of relationships by researchers departing the field. Following the end of fieldwork, I set up an email database and sent monthly updates to participants and peer researchers about the progress of the project. Retaining these networks also provides the opportunity to undertake further research down the line to potentially update the findings of this project and observe the evolution of the emerging trend I note towards more RCO engagement by formal institutions.

Note: Due to the joint analysis and collaborative writing of some fieldwork findings by myself and my research assistants, I use the plural 'we' for the majority of this report.

Overview of Research Process:

(Stage 1) Literature review

(Stage 2) Train refugees as peer researchers and together conduct semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, transect walks, ethnographic interviews, and participant observation

(Stage 3) Identify:

- Forms, functions, and motives of refugee-led assistance initiatives

- Conditions and frameworks (existing or ideal) for collaboration between established humanitarian organisations and refugee-led assistance initiatives

- The extent to which refugees' sources of assistance come from external actors or their own community-led initiatives

(Stage 4) Analysis and follow-up research

(Stage 5) Writing, publishing, and dissemination

Theory

Due to my research focus on creating an inclusive humanitarian assistance model, I sought out theoretical frameworks that focused on inclusivity and were also practically useful for analyzing the work of refugee-led organisations in refugee communities. After deep reading of several different theorists, I focused on Ager and Strang's integration framework (2008; 2010) and Putnam's theory of social capital (2000) to examine links between integration and social connections. Ager and Strang's framework, drawing upon definitions provided by Mulvey (2010) and the UK Home Office (2005), defines integration as:

the process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute to the community, and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents. (UK Home Office 2005: 5)

This is an ideal situation that should be the result of a successful integration process. Apart from integration being defined as this *result*, we conceive of integration as a *process.* In order to achieve this inclusion (not assimilation) into a society, we consider integration to be a two-way process that requires active involvement from both refugees and asylum seekers, as well

as members of the host community (Lomba 2010; Mulvey 2010). Ager and Strang posit that while immigration status questions are considered important by asylum seekers and refugees, having the skills, knowledge and feeling of belonging that are necessary for the *process* of integration is even more important (Ager and Strang 2008; Ager and Strang 2010).

One of the four broad domains[1] that Ager and Strang identify as crucial for integration, and which also corresponds to our definition, is 'processes of social connection within and between groups' (Ager and Strang 2008: 185; see also Putnam 2002: 5). These social connections can be seen as building individual social capital. Putnam's theory of social capital[2] differentiates between inward social capital and outward social capital, with the latter divided into social links, social bridges and social bonds. Inward social capital is defined as the individual emotional resources and the ability for capacity building in a particular social surrounding (Putnam 2002: 9). It is the confidence of an individual to be able to 'play within the system' of expectations and rules in a particular surrounding (Atfield, Brahmbhatt and O'Toole 2007; Losi and Strang 2008; Spicer 2008; Calhoun, LiPuma and Postone 1993). Social links refer to the ease of connections between an individual and structures of the state; the classic example is contact with bureaucratic processes (Ager and Strang 2010: 596; Putnam 2000). Social bridges refer to contact between individuals and members of the surrounding society (Putnam 2002: 10). Importantly, social bridges do not demand a high level of friendship and regular interaction. Trust, defined as the abstract knowledge to be able to rely on one another, is sufficient (Ager and Strang 2010: 599; Putnam 1993: 167). This focus on trust also emphasises the approach to integration as a two-way process, as reciprocity is crucial for trust. Finally, social bonds are the connections between members of the same ethnic and/or social group, such as between non-nationals.

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[1] The remaining three broad domains are the 'foundation' (rights and citizenship), 'facilitators' (language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability), and 'markers and means' (employment, housing, education and health). See Ager and Strang (2008: 170).

[2] Putnam himself quotes a definition by Woolcock and Narayan (2000) as providing a useful definition: 'The basic idea of social capital is that a person's family, friends and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be called upon on in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and leveraged for material gain.'

Context

The study of refugee-led assistance is almost entirely un-researched in a developing country context and is only nascent in European countries. This research primarily examined refugee-led assistance in two field sites: Berlin, Germany (*Flughafen Tempelhof* and other refugee centres), and Kampala, Uganda (*Nsambya, Katwe,* and other refugee-hosting neighbourhoods). Germany, a country with strong social assistance, is the current major European destination for Syrian refugees, with over 800,000 asylum seekers. Over 90,000 of these reside in Berlin. Uganda hosts over 500,000 refugees, approximately 65,000 of which live in Kampala. While Uganda provides refugees with many legal rights, there is – in contrast to Germany – very little government or humanitarian assistance available in cities. These very different contexts have enabled me to interrogate the roles that host country (including Southern and Northern) environments play in promoting or discouraging refugee agency as well as how the duration of exile affects the creation and forms of refugee-led assistance initiatives. The different refugee populations I researched also provided a basis for examining how different nationalities and cultures may affect the creation of grassroots assistance initiatives.

Through my research I learned that refugees engage in collective action and self-help across economic, political, and social contexts. Economically, refugee entrepreneurship often leads to the creation of businesses, cooperatives, or financial instruments. Politically, refugees may mobilise to contest homeland governments, protest inadequate assistance in exile, or simply to ensure adequate representation in camps and cities. Socially, faith-based organisations, cultural associations, and sports teams among refugee communities. That refugees, like all human beings, have the capacity to help themselves and to collectively organise -- what social scientists call 'agency' – is beginning to be recognised.

And yet one area of striking neglect is the role that refugees play as providers of humanitarian assistance to other refugees. Rather than simply being passive recipients of assistance, they often organise among themselves, whether through formal organisations or informal networks, to support vulnerable members of the community. Formal international assistance is rarely sufficient to allow refugees to meet their basic needs, and so refugees themselves often provide alternative sources of support. In the following report, through case studies of organisations in Kampala, Uganda, and Berlin, Germany, I present some of the important and still underrecognised work being undertaken by refugees themselves.

Findings: Berlin, Germany[3]

Berlin, Europe's third largest city at the turn of the 20th century, evokes images of the cultural metropolis and industrial center of the Golden Twenties, the darkness and cruelty of the National Socialist regime, and decades of Cold War tension. 2019 marks/celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall and the population of Germany's unified capital is approaching four million inhabitants. Including, an international community of artists, academics, diplomats, journalists, and an increasing number of tech workers, some of which is contributing to gentrification and a steep rising cost of living. Berlin is also a very popular tourist destination with more than 13 million visitors in 2018. However, not all of Berlin's newcomers arrived out of choice. Three years after the influx of more than one million refugees in 2015, there are now approximately 50,000 Syrian refugees living in Berlin. While many continue to receive state assistance, others have found support in active, vibrant community initiatives – or created these themselves.

These initiatives are examples of a much bigger story of Syrian organisations and refugee-led organisations around the world. One research mapping project found that over 75 Syrian assistance organisations exist in Germany (Citizens for Syria). In this report, we document a variety of Syrian initiatives in Berlin in an effort to contribute to the growing movement on refugee-led organisations and refugee self-governance. In 2018, we published about Syrian-led refugee organizations (FMR) in Berlin and observe that more and more Syrians are founding their own organizations, starting their own initiatives and projects, not only in Berlin, but across Germany. We met with social workers, teachers, publishers, etc. to learn more about the needs of the Syrians in Berlin and how they are building an infrastructure of support for culture, learning and integration support. This year (2019), we met these organizations again to understand what is working, not working and what needs are most relevant/urgent?

Help from the German State

In contrast to the majority of the world's major refugee-hosting countries, refugees in Germany are provided with a large amount of state support. Refugees that are accepted into the country are assigned to a local city or town, gain temporary residency, and begin the so-called integration process. Although new arrivals in Germany in 2015 were originally housed in school gyms and other emergency shelters, there are now longer-term 'refugee hostels' and ongoing efforts to help refugees find apartments of their own. Once residency has been established or looks likely, refugees attend an integration course to learn the language and

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[3] Please note that this section is shorter than the findings section on organisations in Kampala as the research is still being analysed.

German way of life, and have their first meeting at a Jobcenter to learn about employment prospects. Unemployed refugees receive a monthly sum to cover living costs. Local guides, at the municipal level, support local orientation and logistics, including the Foreigners Registration Office, organisations, and clubs. As the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees states, "Integration means seamless inclusion in Germany's education and training system and into the labor market." However, finding a job without proper qualifications or German language skills is difficult, as is finding decent housing – one government study found that Berlin lacked 130,000 affordable apartments for low-income earners, even without taking refugee families in need of housing into consideration.

Although refugees receive a wide range of support from the German state, gaps in services and types of help remain. In many cases, in addition to the German state trying to meet refugees' basic needs for shelter, legal advice, health care, and language, further needs are addressed by grassroots initiatives found across the country. Hundreds of projects, networks, and organisations support the efforts of the State and aspire to meet other needs of the refugee community left unmet through formal assistance. Almost all of these have formed since 2015.

Neue Nachbarschaft ('New Neighbourhood')
https://neuenachbarschaft.de/info/

Marina Naprushkina is the founder of Neue Nachbarschaft (NN) – an effort to create a non-hierarchical community that fosters connection between new and old Berliner. Originally from Belarus, Marina is a political artist and activist, and creativity is at the core of NN in the form of music, dance, self-expression and political action. *Kunst als werkzeug* – art is the tool to express, connect and create. NN is located in the historically working class area called Moabit in what used to be a Chinese restaurant. It was founded in 2013.

Marina was inspired to create and nourish a space that would cultivate a new form of neighborhood, society and connection. Marina says, "People want to come here. They feel safe and welcome. They are curious and want a new way of relating. People from diverse cultural backgrounds make new discoveries. It is a learning process on all sides and the learning we do here is fun." Some families travel 90 minutes on Saturdays to practice languages, make art, play games, and eat together.

Marina observes that the participants at NN who are not refugees profit more from the community than refugees. "Old Berliner" connect, make friends, and feel less lonely.

Debbie started volunteering in August 2015. She wanted to help the refugees in a more meaningful way than through logistical efforts such as donating clothes. Debbie's an artist and responded to a request Marina put out, seeking printmaking materials. Today, Debbie spends most Saturdays at NN. It's part of her weekly routine and social life. Debbie feels NN is successful because it's open, collaborative and flexible. English is her first language and she offered English lessons for children, and parents. She had an idea to write stories and publish books, so she created a workshop and offered a public reading. "NN could be a model for other communities," she said. With a physical space and committed participants, this model could work anywhere.

Camp One

FB https://www.facebook.com/CampOneCafe/

Relationships between refugees and Germans/locals can make the world of difference for a refugee, especially the younger, more vulnerable. Support from a German/local could be the difference between finishing school and turning to the streets or a mosque, for refuge. Camp One, is the first self-help organisation to support people who fled to Germany in 2015/16. The mission is to be there for others and already, members volunteer to support others and give back what they once received.

Like Neue Nachbarschaft, the Camp One Café is not a meeting place for refugees, but an open space for people to exchange, share and explore ideas. Dinner is prepared and served every Thursday night to a lively crowd of refugees (mostly young men 16 years and older) and locals for a 1€ donation. People drop in as early as 5:00pm and stay until 9:00 or later. Conversation, connection, authentic language practice, fun, and thereby support evolve organically in this simple two-room setting filled with tables and chairs.

Change of Assistance Over Time

Initially, grassroots support by Syrians in Berlin mainly took the form of helping refugees receive emergency assistance and navigate Germany's asylum and registration bureaucracy. In the early days of high numbers of refugee arrivals, for instance, groups of Syrian refugees stationed themselves at main train stations in Germany, and equipped newcomers with maps, directions, and overviews of next steps to registering and finding shelter.

However, in the last three years there has been a shift from providing logistics and daily life assistance to offering cultural, community, and creative support that meets refugees' psychological, emotional, and personal needs. In many cases, these refugee-led efforts are now registered German organisations.

The **Salaam Culture and Sport Club (*Salaamkulturklub*)** is one such example of a refugee-led organisation that has adapted itself according to the needs of refugees. The club was founded by an academic, judge, journalist, and interpreter who recognised that Syrian refugees desperately needed translating and other logistical support in registering as refugees, applying for jobs, and learning about the complex German bureaucratic and educational system. The club also offered a free place for people arriving in 2015 (when the number of arrivals was at its peak) to stay overnight, in order to join the long queue in the nearby registration office the next morning.

Over the last few years, Salaam's assistance activities have both formalised and broadened. As well as ad hoc, advice now comes in the form of weekly presentations on different themes, such as how to find and apply for a job, or how to register children in school. There is also a monthly 'Success Story' presentation of a refugee who has accomplished something in Berlin, be it becoming employed or mastering a higher German language level. Additionally, the club now offers a cafe to promote intercultural exchange and a range of other support including language practice, sport and freetime activities (also for refugees with disabilities), and intercultural and creative projects. While the support they offer is significant, all of the club's employees, including its founders, are volunteers and the organisation struggles against bigger, international organisations for limited state funding.

Differing Aims of Refugee-led Organisations

Although refugee-led organisations offer varying types of support (i.e. logistics versus emotional) divisions in their ultimate aims are also apparent. Syrian refugee-led organisations in Berlin, for example, can be separated into those aiming to reinforce conservative forms of Syrian culture, religion, and law, and those using Syrian culture as a means to promote the integration of Syrians and the social cohesion of Syrians and Germans. To some extent, differences in these organisations' beneficiary population are also similarly apparent, as rural, less educated Syrians appear more drawn towards conservative, 'traditional' forms of assistance, such as those offered by mosques or churches, whereas urban, formally educated people are drawn to more culturally diverse initiatives.

One of the most established Syrian cultural organisations in Berlin is *Mada*, housed in the cultural community centre *Ulme 35*, run by Germans and named after its address on *Ulmenallee* in a quiet part of former West Berlin. The cultural centre offers *Mada* office and event space, and important ongoing collaboration with German artists and activists. This unique organisation, founded by Safi, a Syrian refugee, focuses on dialogue, art, culture, and

community by offering a robust cultural program of lectures, theatre, films, play, readings, and art exhibitions. There are events almost everyday, including German language training and events for children and families, and many activities are intended for both Syrian and international participants. The idea for *Mada* arose in direct opposition to the conservative Syrian cultural groups in Berlin, as Safi felt that Syrian culture was not being adequately represented or experienced through them.

Another significant refugee-led cultural initiative is Berlin's first Arabic library – *Baynetna* – meaning 'between us'. In the shadow of Berlin's Soviet-era television tower at Alexanderplatz, Maher, the co-founder and a Syrian refugee, leads a team of committed volunteers offering Arabic books to local readers, as well as promoting learning for Germans and "Westerners" about Arabic culture and literature. Maher, a publisher from Syria, first had the idea to create a library in 2016 due to the lack of Arabic books in Berlin. He was able to start the project in rooms at a *Heim* (refugee housing, literally meaning 'home' in German) used for learning and community gathering, and slowly gathered books by donation. The project also hosts regular literary events, and strives to use these as places of intercultural exchange and learning. In this way, it is 'not just a library but a literary salon', according to Dana, another co-founder; multiple events, for example, feature both a Syrian and German poet or author, whose reading is then interpreted in both Arabic and German.

In February 2018 Berlin's public library offered *Baynetna* shared space to house the library, which is now open to the public four days each week. However, books, shelves and furniture need to be packed and unpacked weekly because the main library still uses the space, creating a regular reminder that this home, too, may be temporary. Maher, like many refugees seeking to create meaning in their new lives, said he comes to the library everyday because it reminds him of his former publishing work in Syria. He views books as a powerful tool for cultural education and believes that the integration of Syrians into Germany can be facilitated through the knowledge and awareness that can be gained by sharing culture through literature.

In contrast to secular efforts such as *Mada* and *Baynetna* to integrate and bridge the worlds of Syrian refugees with Germany and vice versa, conservative assistance often centres around churches and mosques, or through the work of independent *Imams* (the worship leaders in a mosque). One such leader in Berlin is Ahmed, who studied history and law in Syria and practiced Sharia law as a lawyer for 20 years before coming to Germany in 2013. As a lawyer in Syria, he acted as an arbiter for Sharia courts handling marriage, divorce, personal situations, family conflicts, and business contracts.

During his first Ramadan in Berlin, while living in a refugee *Heim*, Ahmed asked administrators for a room to be allocated for prayer. After Ramadan, the *Heim* administration told him that he can keep the room to use as a mosque, and refugees in the *Heim* began to consider him their *Imam*, seeking his advice and asking him to mediate conflicts. Although he is not formally trained, Ahmed now has established a reputation in Berlin and across Germany as an authority who offers guidance.

For Ahmed, the three most significant differences between Syria and Germany are related to marriage, religion and family, especially regarding women and children. As he stated, "Sharia law is totally different when it comes to women and children. Germans need to understand this…Equality is not fair for women. Women deserve justice." Ahmed believes that Germans and Germany need to recognize Islam and respect the Syrian family structure – i.e. Sharia law needs to be respected as legally legitimate. He has requested permission to open an office in Berlin to offer legal advice and said he hopes to eventually act as an advisor to the German State regarding Sharia law. His work demonstrates the breadth of support and guidance refugees seek, as well as how different types of assistance may in fact not complement but contradict state-led and other support, as well as the legal frameworks of host countries.

Findings: Kampala, Uganda

In Kampala, Uganda, refugee-run organisations host activities which aim to foster refugee self-reliance and – with their focus on language and skills training – to actively contribute to local integration and development efforts. These organisations arose out of grassroots efforts by refugees to help each other and are now nationally registered or community-based non-profit organisations with their own committees, boards of directors, websites and logos. In short, these are professional organisations with hard-working staff, which are important to the material and social well-being of many refugees in Kampala.

Refugee-run organisations, such as Hope of Children and Women Victims of Violence (HOCW), Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) and the Bondeko Refugee Livelihoods Center, are important sources of social and practical resources for refugees in Kampala. These organisations offer skills training in a variety of areas such as tailoring, arts and crafts, hairdressing and computer literacy. Functional adult literacy classes and basic to advanced English lessons are also provided. Organisations also offer community-based micro-savings and lending groups run by refugee leaders, which address refugees' abiding exclusion from formal micro-finance institutions.

Importantly, refugee-run organisations provide refugee-serving organisations such as the Refugee Law Project (RLP), Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) with refugee community 'hubs' that can be utilised to implement livelihoods trainings and programmes to sensitise refugees to a variety of issues such as maternal health and gender-based violence. Several initiatives led by refugee-run organisations began with support and training from IRC and FRC.

However, these activities are not labelled as partnerships, and thus the integral role of refugee leaders and organisations in these operations, which are not simply a case of benefactors serving beneficiaries, remains under-recognised. Instead, these interactions comprise a nuanced interplay of organisational resources, existing community hubs created by refugee-run organisations and refugee initiative and leadership for particular livelihoods training and enterprises. Together, these resources enable livelihoods training for refugees that may be impossible to operationalise without both refugee and non-refugee actors taking part.

Importantly, directors and members of refugee-run organisations do not feel sufficiently included in the livelihoods creation or development process. Many refugees with advanced skills are involved in initiatives run by outside organisations but only in limited capacities. For example, a refugee working at the Bondeko Center was a trained nurse in his home country yet is prevented from practising as a nurse in Uganda due to the cost of becoming re-certified. He emphasised, however, that he and his fellow refugee nurses could be tremendous assets to the refugees at Bondeko Center, as well as to Ugandans in the area, if they were to receive support to treat instead of just educate refugees. Describing a health training offered by InterAid, the main implementing partner in Uganda of UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) he said,

"InterAid gathered all the refugee nurses for a meeting but trained us only to sensitise refugees in malaria.... refugees must go all the way to InterAid just to get paracetamol. Or they go and wait two days to go to Mulago [Uganda's national referral hospital] for malaria. But there are many nurses here. We can diagnose and treat from right here at the Center!"

Although sensitisation on health issues is a valuable contribution to communities, the main health struggle cited by refugees is in obtaining medicine and good treatment at hospitals and clinics. Yet the health skills of the nurses at Bondeko Center remain unutilised, despite their eagerness to work and the desperate need for health care in Uganda. This example highlights a struggle for involvement and partnership that extends across the many sectors that refugees are qualified to work within.

An example of successful refugee-led development and integration

In efforts to share their skills with others and in the face of inadequate assistance, refugees across Kampala have founded their own organisations. Despite the constraints we have detailed here, some organisations managed to succeed and grow; exploring how this happens serves to emphasize the perversities of the current system for RCOs, and the importance of particular qualities for understanding how these can be navigated by some refugee leaders. We describe this as the 'inspiration/opportunity/network' cycle and suggest that this is a particularly significant means of bypassing formal institutions in Kampala for Congolese refugee-led organisations.

HOCW was created in 2008 by Congolese refugees and a Ugandan pastor, and expanded through the support of international volunteers who fundraised and provided materials. Located on the outskirts of Kampala, this organisation provides various livelihoods activities for both refugees and local Ugandans, as well as English lessons and programmes for children. The initiative began after women expressed the need to diversify their skills, as the majority could only find work in Kampala washing clothes; it started in 2013 with a tailoring programme, and now runs a range of programmes including arts and crafts, hairdressing, mushroom-growing and business skills. An estimated 40% of training participants at HOCW are Ugandans. Such refugee-run organisations have the ability to advance local integration through building community networks and fostering self-reliance, supporting non-refugees as well as refugees in their area. The following pages provide an in-depth case study of Bolingo's work as one key example of how a successful refugee-led organisation was created – and maintained.

Case Study: HOCW

Inspiration

Hope for Children and Women Victims of Violence (HOCW) was started in 2008 by Bolingo, a Congolese refugee who had fled DRC in 2000 after the death of his father. A farmer by trade, Bolingo arrived at the Ugandan border with no money or possessions. A chance encounter there with a local Baptist pastor helped him achieve his goal of reaching Kampala. As an urban refugee, Bolingo was legally required to register with the police station, but no one knew where to direct him other than to UNHCR. At their offices he was not given assistance;

instead, he was sent to a bus parked 100 metres from the Old Kampala Police Station, where more than 60 refugees were already living. The bus was overcrowded, and people were struggling to find enough to eat.

But Bolingo, relieved at last to be out of danger, began to see opportunities to build a new life. 'I spent my free time moving around and talking to people, and got to know the community well, he said. One day, a priest named Father Antony Musaala came to visit the site after Bolingo met him in the street and told him about the way that people were living. The priest was shocked at the desperate situation, particularly the lack of shelter. He began to advocate and try to fundraise to help the community, and managed to secure a building where the refugees were able to sleep. 'Life started there' Bolingo said with a smile. The priest started a charity named Agape Pendo Lamugu (Agape, for short) to help refugees during the six months that they expected to wait for their refugee status to be granted by the government. During this waiting period, refugees were unable to work legally and support themselves, despite a lack of official and other assistance. Bolingo worked closely with the priest; his relationships with people in the community meant he understood what they needed and how best to help. He was given responsibility by the priest to ensure people helped each other and that their needs were met.

In 2003, the charity was able to buy its own land in Ndejje some 25 miles outside Kampala, and received funding and client referrals – essentially vulnerable refugees in need of assistance, for whom there was no emergency aid available in Kampala - from Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). However, by 2005 JRS itself was struggling to support the number of refugees living in the area. Over the months they funded fewer people, and for less time. The money dwindled and then ran out, but Bolingo remained working for Agape, saying he was inspired by his own experiences to continue to work with refugees. Then in 2008 he took the plunge and started his own initiative. 'When women were asking for help, they were vulnerable. They were raped. This is why we decided to focus on women,' Bolingo explained.

Opportunity

Bolingo's experience working with Agape in the early 2000s was a significant part of HOCW's trajectory. In 2007, Bolingo married Emily, another refugee from DRC. A mother of eight, including five adoptees, Emily said with a smile that HOCW had been her idea. She had always dreamed of having an organisation to look after people who had been abandoned and had nowhere else to turn. Back in Goma in Eastern DRC, Emily had been a nurse, but she had also worked for some time as a counsellor for an NGO called Équipe d' Education et d'Encadrement des Traumatisés de Nyiragongo (ETN) which provided training and education to victims of

violence. ETN was not a small organisation. It had successfully formed partnerships with the World Food Programme, UNDP, and CARE International.

HOCW started with one teacher, 15 students and one classroom; by 2018 they had 20 teachers, 700 students, and seven classrooms. The organisation specialised in skills training and language classes, but also ran several savings groups and had a partnership with a medical school in the United States which brought volunteer medical students to the organisation each year. In 2015 HOCW had to expand beyond the buildings that had initially been secured by the priest, and the Slovenian Foreign Ministry bought it the land needed to accommodate the expansion. In 2018 HOCW was one of the largest refugee-led CBOs in Kampala. Buildings had sprung up across its compound in Ndejje, and more building work was being planned to accommodate new classrooms.

Networks

Together, Bolingo and Emily had first-hand experience of the norms of international institutions, such as the need for business plans, clear project proposals, and transparent financial systems. They also understood that although visiting volunteers wanted an 'authentic experience', they also wanted some creature comforts such as hot water and good wi-fi. This knowledge had helped them to cater the image and indeed the activities of HOCW to an audience who could help them to do the work they see as desperately needed by urban refugees. Bolingo smiled wryly when asked about his Slovenian volunteers: 'If you want people to eat with you, you have to make sure they enjoy the meal.'

In addition to running HOCW, Bolingo was one of the founders of the Refugee-Led Organizational Network (RELON) in Kampala, which regularly brings together multiple refugee leaders. In our conversations about its potential, he emphasised the need to show strength and solidarity in order to encourage international donors to have faith in the capacity of refugee-led organisations to deliver. Indeed, all of the registered Congolese CBOs in Kampala had an online presence through their own websites and made prolific use of social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups to promote their work internationally. They also had an international profile, complete with a glossy website and a volunteer programme. They had a positive reputation with INGOs in Kampala like the Finnish Refugee Council, which had trained Bolingo in capacity-building some years before. HOCW had thereby carefully created an excellent reputation – not only with local Ugandans and refugees, but also with the international community.

However, rather than relying on InterAid or UNHCR, Bolingo was clear that the successes of HOCW were related to the international links he has been able to cultivate through chance encounters and opportunities. The priest he met on the border was born in the UK and had his own connections; the support from the Slovenian Foreign Ministry began after two Slovenian volunteers spent time at HOCW. An American colleague based in California handled the website and the majority of fundraising efforts. Through these connections, others have emerged such as All The Sky Foundation, a Canadian organisation which came and built a library on the site in 2017. Refugees at HOCW are keen to learn skills which didn't require additional materials. 'Hairdressing is popular with refugees,' Bolingo remarked; 'the skills stay in your hands, so you don't have to meet additional expenses to make money from it.' In the future, Bolingo would like to expand and establish a vocational training centre for both urban and settlement-based refugees in Uganda.

Analysing 'success'

Whilst the most established CBOs such as HOCW and YARID are often perceived by other organisations to have been successful because of funding from UNHCR, our research indicates that this is not really the case. It is reaching beyond the borders of Uganda that enables the greatest growth for refugee-led organisations. YARID's founder Robert recounted successfully bidding for funding from UNHCR's Global Youth Initiative Fund with very limited results, which provides more background to the UNHCR officers we spoke with who provided this as an example of the agency's successful work with refugee-led organisations. According to Robert, although YARID was told they would receive the funding, the money was initially not being released by UNHCR Uganda because YARID was not a UNHCR implementing partner. It was only through his contacts at UNHCR Geneva that Robert was able to bypass UNHCR Uganda to access the money. As a result of these delays, the success of the project was compromised, as was faith in UNHCR's legitimacy at the national level.

For organisations like YARID and HOCW, flying below the radar is the best bet – and this requires find other means of generating income. 'If you wait for just ten thousand dollars funding, you'll be waiting forever, and spend that money in a year going to the office and doing what they ask but it'll never come back to you,' Robert stated. For both YARID and HOCW, international connections had been vital for enabling this strategy. For organisations which cannot directly reach the international community for support, membership of RELON is only one option. Some organisations now aim to develop themselves as social enterprises rather than rely on partnerships at all. This was a perspective repeated by Joseph, the vice-chair of RELON and the organisation Hope for Refugees in Action, which focuses on

microfinance and credit for refugees to start businesses. 'Depending on donor money is unsustainable for refugee-led organisations,' he explained. 'There is sometimes money for capacity building, but that is all.'

The key to understanding who can take advantage of this process lies in the qualities of leadership that certain refugees inhabit. Bolingo feels that the organisations he has worked with are drawn to the authenticity of his vision and work. 'I wouldn't be here if I had bad motives. You need heart to do this work. I have made sacrifices.' Regardless of level of formalisation, strong leadership was characteristic across Congolese organisations, with most activities being centred around whoever had initiated the group and registered it as a CBO. It was through such leaders that relationships with external donors were successfully development. In the case of HOCW, a volunteer exchange led to a relationship with the Slovenian Foreign Ministry; for YARID, Robert's relationship with someone at Xavier Trust helped him to obtain funding for an early literacy project; at 1Y1H, Destin's friendship with an UNHCR staff member who believed in a technology solution they were proposing led to two years of funding and their capacity to formalise and establish themselves in Nsambya. In many cases, a personable leader was pivotal in the 'success stories' of Congolese RCOs. Despite its obvious implications for sustainability, when there are no clear routes for engagement and partnership, personal relationships matter even more.

At InterAid and UNHCR Uganda, there was a broadly held perception of refugees as demanding trouble-makers, who were insufficiently grateful for the generosity that they have been granted by the Government of Uganda. On the other side, refugees saw InterAid, UNHCR and OPM, which have a tripartite agreement on refugee management, as not only in cahoots against refugees, but actively corrupt and untrustworthy. RELON and its members had to tread a thin line with InterAid, UNHCR and OPM: while striving for recognition as important actors, they could also not appear too political and thereby threatening of other formal organisations' work, lest they be challenged or shut down. This made for a delicate positioning; in Robert's words 'officially we (YARID) have no issue with UNHCR and InterAid - we simply do not work with them.'

With limited alternative sources of support available to individual organizations from other international organisations in Uganda, the Refugee Led Organisations Network had taken its own measures to pursue impact and expansion of refugee-led organisations. Opportunities such as funding and introductions garnered by its more influential members were brought into RELON. Those who failed to attend meetings - and therefore did not participate in bolstering the image of RELON as an inter-community force - were also excluded from these opportunities. The power of RELON therefore lay in the continued involvement of bigger

refugee-led CBOs and their continued goodwill in promoting and involving others. However, this was not done through pure altruism; the larger Congolese organisations at the centre of RELON perceived solidarity as advantageous for both the funding priorities of international donors, and strength in numbers against InterAid and OPM's alleged corruption.

The new opportunities that HOCW had generated had led to new investments. Yet opportunities often do not come without compromise. As mentioned, in 2017, a Canadian organisation called All The Sky Foundation paid for a shipment of books donated by Americans, building materials donated by American businesses, and a team of builders to be flown over to HOCW at great expense rather than use local materials or employ local staff. The only books seen being read at HOCW's grand library were the few children's books included, which seemed to be at a more suitable reading level for the HOCW children and youth. This library, therefore, appeared to be more an example of Westerners striving to 'do good' than true engagement and collaboration with a refugee-led organisation. The power dynamics at the heart of such partnerships leave refugee-led organisations unable to negotiate terms and challenge problematic activities – just as in their interactions with InterAid.

On top of these challenges was a less tangible barrier to meaningful engagement, but one which would appear much more difficult to overcome: UNHCR and its partners simply did not see refugees as meaningful providers of protection and assistance. This is exacerbated not only by the monopoly of InterAid, but by the government's limitations on refugees' 'political' activities. This idea itself remains ill-defined and vague, and appeared to be used primarily as a threat by OPM to prevent refugees from outright resistance to the status quo. While impressive in their aspiration and the steps taken towards sustainability, refugee-led organisations' long-term success of in Kampala relies just as much on the shifting of institutional power balance as on the actions of RCOs themselves.

Next Steps for Policymakers & Practitioners

There is an opportunity for national or international organisations already working with these communities to support them through, for example, paying rent, either in part or in full, for the spaces that refugee-run organisations base their operations out of. This seems especially reasonable given that UNHCR's implementing partners and other organisations serving refugees also utilise these spaces for their own operations, and through them gain access to refugees who otherwise might not be identifiable among local members of the urban poor. However, of the organisations researched in Kampala,

only FRC had a programme specifically focused on building the capacity of refugee-run organisations. In addition to training on leadership and finances, it offers refugee-run organisations 5 million Ugandan shillings (approximately US$1,500) per year to start or expand programmes that contribute to organisational sustainability. Refugees involved in FRC's programme have found this useful and felt that their own work and skills in creating organisations was acknowledged and called upon through this support.

Berlin, Germany: Currently, hundreds of thousands of refugees are living in relative safety in Germany. They continue to work on language acquisition and pursue financially viable, meaningful livelihoods. In the case of the formally educated, getting foreign qualifications recognised to work, for example, as engineers and teachers, can take years of training and waiting. While many of the grassroots organisations in Berlin highlighted refugees' desperate need for jobs, leaders often feel constrained in their organisation's ability to do more than offer practical support, such as helping people learn how the German Jobcenter works. Employment seems overall to be a job for the German state to tackle.

However, other themes such as integration and social cohesion are embraced as goals by many refugee-led and German grassroots organisations in Berlin, as is the opposite requisite by others to reinforce Syrian culture, law, and religion. Refugee-led organisations' and initiatives' success in addressing these different needs stems in part from their flexible and adaptable structure, as many organisations have been able to adjust activities based on the skills of volunteers and the needs and interests of participants as they changed over months and years. While Berlin was once thought of as a temporary refuge, it has now become the beginning of a new life and identity for many. Yet the majority of Syrian refugee-led organisations in Berlin do not yet consider themselves sustainable, as they are mainly run by volunteers and are dependent on donations and other ad hoc funding sources. This demonstrates an apparent necessity for stable funding in order to continue their work in the long-term, yet in many ways, such constraints also makes sense. These refugee-led organisations are still new, and, at the end of day, the story of Syrians in Berlin is – four years on – only beginning.

The potential of refugee-run organisations to contribute to local integration and development is enormous, and in both Kampala and Berlin this is already being actualised on a small scale. However, these organisations' capacity to reach more refugees is limited by their ongoing struggle to meet the basic needs of running an organisation – paying rent, accruing funds and tools to implement livelihoods training, and providing stipends to volunteer teachers and staff. The significance of these organisations in the lives of refugees as well as in the ability of international and national non-refugee organisations in Kampala to implement activities should be more widely recognised. The

relative lack of written documentation on refugee-run organisations occludes recognition of them not only as stakeholders but as important partners in livelihoods interventions.

It is also important to recognise that these examples are far from isolated. Refugee-led assistance and social protection can be found in every contemporary displacement crisis, from Myanmar to Venezuela. They emerge in both emergency and protracted crisis situations. They encompass activities as diverse as education, health, livelihoods, finance, and housing. Shanti Mohila ('Peace Women') is a group led by Rohingya women like 60-year-old activist Khalunisa in the Kutupalong-Balukhali settlements Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. It provides counselling services to hundreds of victims of sex and gender-based violence. The Union Venezolana en Peru, created by Venezualan politician Óscar Pérez, provides integration and legal support to 100,000 Venezuelans. The Project for the Legal Support for Syrian Refugees and Palestinians (PLSSRP), established in Beirut by Syrian lawyer Brahim al Qassem, has offered legal aid to refugees since 2013.

Conclusion

The capacity for refugees to self-organise and provide support is similarly unrecognised and this, whether unintended or not, serves to perpetuate the perception of refugees as merely beneficiaries, even where guidance documents are designed to utilise their agency. Providing funding dedicated to sustaining and strengthening refugee-run organisations is an important step to take. A shift in current rhetoric and practice from seeking refugee participation in programmes to forming refugee partnerships to implement them – and thus holding the value of inclusivity at their core – is perhaps an even better one.