Overview: Refugee self-reliance in urban markets – Halba, Delhi, and Thessaloniki

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Summary

This research project has addressed the subject of refugee self-reliance in cities by analysing humanitarian programming and refugees' own self-support practices in three cities: Halba (Lebanon), Delhi (India), and Thessaloniki (Greece). Economic self-reliance is typically framed as a means to, or a reflection of, integration, or at least assimilation. It is often framed as a duty of the refugee. However, self-reliance becomes an unachievable goal when access to the formal labour market is restricted by political and legal barriers that humanitarian actors can do little to break down. Therefore, humanitarian livelihoods interventions focused on self-reliance end up providing a form of distraction through leisure activities, or, at best, supporting refugees' own coping strategies. Meanwhile, the conception of self-reliance in primarily economic terms has often allowed for less attention to be given to important and interrelated social and political factors that determine refugee experiences.

From saving lives to self-reliance

Over the last 30 years, the language, focus and ambition of humanitarian organisations has shifted. In the early 1990s, in the context of an emboldened liberal interventionism, human security became the stated goal for a 'new humanitarianism' that forthrightly rejected the absolute sovereignty of states and imagined a role for itself, beyond saving lives, in the promotion of the sovereignty of individuals. In the new millennium, as a changing conception of crisis has privileged the management of vulnerabilities, resilience – celebrated as a means of connecting relief and development – has become a guiding objective for the humanitarian sector. On the one hand, this evolution in humanitarian discourse has allowed for an expansion of the sphere of humanitarian activity; on the other, it has reflected a steady reduction in the ambition of humanitarian organisations as to what they can practically do.

Increased emphasis on self-reliance by humanitarian organisations now seems to mark a new stage in this paradoxical trajectory, at least conceptually. The concept of self-reliance has informed humanitarian responses to 'protracted refugee situations' for more than a decade. But the programmatic approach associated with self-reliance has taken shape more recently, as humanitarian organisations, facing donor demands for greater 'efficiency', have responded to increased refugee flows into cities by prioritising market-based refugee livelihoods programmes.

The changing focus of humanitarian organisations – from meeting people's basic needs and maintaining their biological life, to improving their access to basic freedoms (human security), to strengthening their coping capacities in response to external 'shocks' (resilience), to supporting them so that they can independently 'meet essential needs... in a sustainable manner'[1] (self-reliance) – reflects a generalised transfer of responsibility for personal well-being, from society and the state, to the individual, as an agent in a rational marketplace. Humanitarians withdraw from 'the field', and 'the market' becomes a primary (and expansive) site of activity. This concludes the shift towards non-interventionary modes of humanitarian action, once justified as promoting staff security and efficiency, and now presented as the guarantee of 'local empowerment'. It also concludes the conversion of humanitarian organisations into willing enablers of inclusive and frictionless markets – champions of a pure, productive, and equitable capitalism.

As humanitarian organisations expand their urban operations, the city offers a testing ground for new market-based humanitarian technologies, but it also contributes to redefining the focus and limits (temporal, spatial, operational) of humanitarian action.

The end of the 'humanitarian marketplace'?

The attention to markets for standard goods and services perhaps signals a move away from the idea of the 'humanitarian marketplace' – a notional space, distinct and hermetic, in which humanitarian organisations engage in well-meaning, but not always effective, transactions with their intended beneficiaries, who, as clients, might hold them to account.[2] This alters the importance and meaning humanitarian organisations ascribe to local empowerment. To the extent that it was previously a concern (for more 'developmental' humanitarian organisations), local empowerment was desirable but incidental, and it was associated with participation, imagined as the exercise of agency by 'crisis-affected people' in the humanitarian marketplace. As the humanitarian marketplace disappears, participation becomes redundant, or at least difficult to operationalise. And local empowerment then becomes a principal objective of humanitarian action – self-reliance itself, as freedom from,

or a lack of, dependence. In this context, local empowerment goes from a concrete positivity – the attainment of something known and observable – to a negativity – a 'lack'.

This reconceptualisation of local empowerment has two important implications. The first is that the transfer of responsibility for personal well-being to the individual (part of a broader process of neoliberal development) comes to appear empowering, and the attention of humanitarian organisations is thus turned further away from the structural conditions (political, social, economic) that might have led to an individual becoming an intended beneficiary of humanitarian action and that might continue to shape this individual's everyday experiences. The second is that humanitarian organisations strip themselves of agency – they can only empower by withdrawing. Particularly since 'do no harm' principles were mainstreamed in the humanitarian sector, humanitarian organisations have intervened in conflicts and after disasters with caution that their aid should not foster dependence among its recipients. But once local empowerment becomes a primary objective, synonymous with self-reliance, they intervene to prevent dependence on their interventions – a strangely circular logic.[3]

We might therefore ask what material impact humanitarian organisations can have on the self-reliance of their intended beneficiaries through self-reliance programmes. The three studies carried out as part of this research project – in Delhi (India),[4] Halba (Lebanon),[5] and Thessaloniki (Greece)[6] – address this question with attention to refugees. And all three highlight the tension between the ambition to enable refugee self-reliance and the limits of humanitarian programmes.

Political and legal barriers

The main barriers to refugee autonomy in these cities are political and legal. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Additional Protocol set out conditions and protections to which refugees are entitled. However, many countries are yet to sign and ratify the convention. In some of these countries, refugee status is determined according to specific domestic legislation. In others, refugees are subject to laws that draw little or no distinction between immigrants in general and people escaping persecution in another country.

India has not signed the Refugee Convention, and has no domestic legal framework for refugee status recognition and protection. The Indian government offers *prima facie* recognition for Tibetan and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, and allows UNHCR to issue Refugee Certificates to people from a small number of countries, who are then able to apply for Long Term Visas (LTVs). Other forced migrants, who in countries party to the Refugee Convention might be recognised as refugees, are only granted permission to

remain on a case-by-case basis, if, like other foreigners, they can meet visa requirements (enrolment in education, marriage to a citizen, etc.). The practice of refugee status determination reflects and reinforces an exclusionary ethno-religious politics through which Muslim refugees in particular (such as the Rohingya, whose case is addressed in the Delhi study authored by Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee) are cast as unwanted outsiders, even when, against the odds, they are legally recognised. When refugees are entitled to legal recognition, they are often unable to access services and excluded from the labour market on account of decisions by government officials, who demand illicit payment and reject valid documentation, or on account of arbitrary delays resulting in part from the absence of a clear legal framework for status recognition. Since the introduction of a new resident identification system, in 2009, refugees have increasingly been dependent on obtaining an identification card (referred to as an Aadhaar Card) to access services and obtain jobs. But there has been confusion among government officials as to the documents a refugee requires in order to obtain this card, and some employers have denied refugees jobs on the basis that they must have obtained the card illegally.

Neither is Lebanon a signatory to the Refugee Convention. The administration of the Palestinian refugee population was the priority of Lebanese refugee policy for many decades. The Lebanese government established the Central Committee for Refugee Affairs in 1950, in response to the arrival of Palestinian refugees following the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. It established the Department of Palestinian Refugee Affairs in 1959. But since the outbreak of war in Syria, in 2011, Lebanese refugee policy has focused on Syrians, who have poured over the border – more than two million of them, subsequently constituting approximately a third of the total Lebanese population. In her study on Halba, Carpi points out that the Lebanese government has progressively tightened residency regulations for refugees since 2015. In January of that year, it established two categories for Syrian refugees seeking to renew their residency permits: those registered by UNHCR, and those not registered, who would require sponsorship by a Lebanese citizen or company. Then, in March, it requested that UNHCR stop registering refugees. According to Human Rights Watch, prohibitive paperwork and fees, as well as the inconsistent application of regulations, have effectively barred those in both categories from legally remaining, working, and educating their children in Lebanon.[7] As part of a bilateral agreement signed in 1993, Syrians have generally been allowed to work in Lebanon (and Lebanese in Syria). However, in 2015, in response to an expanding labour supply, a suppression of wages, and a rise in unemployment, the Lebanese government placed tighter restrictions on the jobs that Syrian refugees could do. Even with a work permit, they can now only work in agriculture, construction, cleaning, and gardening, they are generally limited to temporary contracts, and they are easily exploited by employers who take advantage of their precarious circumstances.

Greece is a signatory to the Refugee Convention and its Additional Protocols. However, as Dicker discusses in her study on Thessaloniki, access to services and accommodation for refugees who have recently arrived in Greece is dependent on status recognition and the acceptance of asylum claims, which may take a long time. UNHCR and INGOs have concentrated on supporting those refugees registered under the EU Relocation Programme. Refugees are only eligible for the EU Relocation Programme if they come from countries that, according to EUROSTAT data for the previous quarter, have an EU-wide asylum recognition rate of more than 75 per cent – of the refugees in Thessaloniki, it is almost exclusively Syrians who qualify.

Identity, not circumstance

Despite differences in refugee governance in India, Lebanon, and Greece, in all three cities studied in this project it is primarily the identities (national, ethnic, and even religious) of refugees, not their individual circumstances, that determine their legal status, and therefore their access to support services and their employment prospects. Once identity becomes a criterion in humanitarian triage, starker divisions can be drawn between outsider-foreigners and insider-citizens. In Thessaloniki, local 'solidarity initiatives', in many cases set up in response to the 2010 Greek debt crisis, have offered an alternative to 'ethnicised' aid, creating opportunities for refugees (recognised and *de facto*) and locals to access the same services, and support one another. In Halba, humanitarian organisations initially focused their activities on Syrian refugees, contributing to a sense of injustice among Lebanese nationals, who had previously lived under Syrian occupation. However, having made their livelihoods programmes accessible to Lebanese locals too, humanitarian organisations now contribute to a new 'ethnicisation of care', reifying the refugee-host dichotomy precisely through their attempts to mitigate it, partly because it is only the host community, whose legal status is unquestionable, that can genuinely use humanitarian programmes as a means to becoming more self-reliant. In this context, then, humanitarian programmes, even when carried out in the name of refugee self-reliance, appear to be part of a social cohesion regime that promotes the stability of the host community.

Self-reliance or self-occupation?

In emphasising the economic aspects of refugee self-reliance, humanitarian organisations have often prioritised the provision of professional training. However, with structural impediments to the integration of refugees into

the labour market, professional training can have only a very limited impact on refugees' economic self-reliance. Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee relay the frustrations of refugees they interviewed in Delhi, who, despite being referred by UNHCR to NGO vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes, had been unable to get a job, partly because they did not have appropriate documentation. Of course, alongside their training programmes, humanitarian organisations can and do campaign for the rights of refugees to live and work in the countries that receive them (there should arguably be even greater investment in such campaigning).[8] But it is not only legal and political barriers that reduce the material impact of humanitarian organisations on refugee self-reliance. Even when informed by market analysis, livelihoods programmes cannot effect changes in the composition and accessibility of labour markets, or changes in labour demand. During her research, Carpi met Syrian and Lebanese women who were participating in a chocolate-making workshop in Halba, run by the EU and UNHCR, in partnership with INGOs. She followed up with both groups once the workshop had finished, and neither had been able to sell their chocolate even on a small scale.

Since, in the cases studied here, participation in livelihoods programmes made little difference to the economic circumstances of refugees, these programmes came to be seen by refugees as providing leisure activity. Unable to alter the material conditions of refugees, humanitarian programmes alter the person of the refugee – not just their professional profile. Livelihoods programmes work to develop the adaptability and resilience of the individual refugee. Humanitarian organisations then go from promoting self-reliance to promoting what looks more like 'self-occupation': on the one hand, they provide opportunities for refugees to stay busy, to 'occupy themselves'; on the other, they reconstruct the identities of refugees, who are drawn into a 'discursive occupation of the self'.[9]

Self-reliance in markets

There is a certain irony in refugees approaching livelihoods programmes as a source of leisure activity. With the emphasis on markets and employment, humanitarian organisations have arguably neglected the social aspects of refugee self-reliance. All three studies highlight the market focus of self-reliance as a programmatic approach. Humanitarian organisations go beyond professional training in their efforts to facilitate the engagement of refugees in local markets: they also seek to enable refugees to create their own businesses and consume. In Thessaloniki, UNHCR and the municipal government are planning the development of a business hub so that refugees can set up and participate in entrepreneurial initiatives. In Halba, Save the Children carries out unconditional cash transfers under the banner of food security, and the

International Rescue Committee offers cash for work, cash for products, and services for work, as part of its Economic Recovery and Development Programme. In Delhi, ACCESS, an Indian NGO, gives start-up grants to refugees wishing to set up small businesses.

Understandings of self-reliance

During interviews conducted by the authors of the three studies, refugees expressed different understandings of self-reliance. For refugees in Halba, self-reliance is generally seen not merely as an ability to engage independently with market forces but as an 'existential status', which cannot be reached while they wait for their legal and political status to be determined. In Thessaloniki, refugees stated that self-reliance depends on factors such as mobility and transportation, access to information and health services, cultural integration, and maintenance of traditional social ties. Yet these perspectives are rarely reflected in economicistic humanitarian narratives on self-reliance, which discursively construct every component of refugee autonomy according to a market logic.[10]

Social aspects of self-reliance

Social activity plays an important role in the well-being of refugees. Refugees interviewed in Thessaloniki expressed their satisfaction that local solidarity initiatives have provided spaces for them to gather and socialise; for example, to hold birthday parties, eat together, learn new languages, study together, and access the Internet. In Delhi, music has been a main pastime for Afghan Christian and Sikh refugees, particularly in their respective places of worship, and it has helped them maintain a sense of community. And work itself also has a social value for refugees, even when it has little market value: domestic work, for example. Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee discuss the gendered character of humanitarian livelihoods programmes in Delhi, which, in focusing on preparation for formal employment, can contribute to a 'double burden' on female Rohingya refugees, who maintain their traditional responsibility for unpaid domestic work and childcare. Almost all of the Rohingya women interviewed as part of this study said that they missed their lives in Burma: the food, the landscape, etc. Displacement inevitably results in a weakening of refugees' social ties; resettlement programmes, which often break up communities and even families, can then compound these feelings of loss. Social activity that connects refugees to each other and to their customs is therefore particularly meaningful.

In situations in which humanitarian organisations do not have the expertise or legitimacy to contribute to such social activity, they might offer support to existing local initiatives that do. However, some local initiatives, such as those described in the study on Thessaloniki, will prefer to maintain their distance from international humanitarian organisations. Carpi and Dicker both discuss the broader impact of the presence of humanitarian organisations. While humanitarian organisations have provided jobs in Halba and Thessaloniki for refugees and locals with particular skills (translation, for example), they can also 'crowd out' local initiatives. By developing a greater understanding of the impact of their presence, humanitarian organisations can avoid reducing the space for activities that might complement their own objectives. Dicker shows that, while local groups in Thessaloniki challenge the causes of forced displacement and the politics of refugee exploitation in a way that humanitarian organisations often cannot or will not, these groups are at risk of being transformed according to the technocratic imperatives of the humanitarian system. By emphasising collective support, they continue to promote a sense of shared struggle that humanitarian organisations, focused on the individual, do not.

Between the individual and the collective

Focused on facilitating market access and stimulating market activity, humanitarian livelihoods programmes inevitably offer an individualised form of support. Yet refugees have multiple and mutual dependencies that the promotion of individual self-reliance can do little to address. Carpi's Halba study shows how, in some cases, refugee family members have become dependent on each other to collect enough money to survive. (Families, in turn, are often dependent on their communities). Meanwhile, Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee reflect on the inter-generational dependencies of refugees in Delhi: refugee families in Delhi see their self-reliance as an objective to be achieved in the future through the education of children; but parents also face challenges that have an impact upon the education of their children. This points to the value of approaches to refugee support that are multi-scalar (for the individual, the household, the community) and multi-temporal (providing assistance that addresses immediate needs, as well as ensuring children can access good education – reducing the likelihood of inter-generational dependencies in the future).

Re-imagining self-reliance

The three studies point to many shortcomings in the conceptual and programmatic frameworks associated with refugee self-reliance. If it is to inform efforts to support the well-being of urban refugees, self-reliance should be conceived as an abstract and perhaps ultimately unachievable status, dependent on structural changes, but to which humanitarian programmes might yet in some way contribute. Such a re-imagining would encourage humanitarians to reflect on and challenge structural barriers to refugee well-being. Based on the evidence of the limitations of their programmes, humanitarian organisations should advocate for residency rights and adequate protection for refugees (recognised and *de facto*). In accordance with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, they should promote refugee rights regardless of legal status. If humanitarian organisations cannot themselves contribute directly to removing structural barriers to refugee well-being, they can give more attention to holding governments to account and to educating government officials on refugee rights, through specialist staff. To do this effectively, they must deepen their understanding of the political and legal contexts in which they work, and of the incentives required to shift governmental policy. In their refugee education programmes, they can also place greater emphasis on providing information about entitlements and rights. And, complementing the activities of informal support networks and solidarity initiatives, they can provide safe spaces for refugees to discuss coping strategies, 'work-arounds', and forms of political contestation through campaigning and representation. These are of course more overtly 'political' activities than the delivery of livelihoods training, which inevitably bring into question the idea – reflected in OCHA's New Way of Working[11] – that there is a basic consensus among the various actors responding to forced displacement (be they humanitarian and development NGOs, social movements, governments, UN agencies, private companies, financial institutions, or others) and that the differences between these actors are temporal and methodological, not political.

In this way, humanitarian organisations should look beyond the market in their efforts to contribute to refugee self-reliance. Their support for refugee livelihoods can itself be strengthened if they approach self-reliance as multi-dimensional: not just economic, but political, legal, social, and cultural. By investing in the participation of refugees throughout the programme-cycle,[12] humanitarian organisations can develop their understanding of how refugees themselves define self-reliance, whether it is a concern for them, and what they feel they might need to achieve it. Where possible and appropriate, humanitarian organisations should seek to address other aspects of self-reliance, directly or indirectly. This might mean designing multi-scalar programmes that address

not only the needs of individuals, but the needs of families, and communities, and multi-temporal programmes that take account of how activities in the short term can provide a basis for the well-being and autonomy of refugees in the longer term, reducing inter-generational dependencies.

Although humanitarian organisations have increased their activity in cities in recent years, they are still some way off developing a rounded understanding of what 'the urban' entails, and the most appropriate role for them in responding to urban conflicts and disasters. They should continue to invest in developing knowledge of the nature of cities and processes of urban transformation, and of the impact of different types of humanitarian action in the city. Carpi's study reflects on the local impact of humanitarian presence; further research into how humanitarian organisations contribute to urban change is necessary, if these organisations are to avoid doing harm indirectly and inadvertently. They should seek to strengthen their engagement with local authorities, promoting continuous knowledge transfer networks rather than reaching out only when they need local legitimacy and access to local populations.

ENDNOTES

1. UNHCR. *Handbook for Self-Reliance*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2005, 1.

2. For a discussion of accountability and the humanitarian marketplace, see Fiori et al. *The Echo Chamber: Results, Management, and the Humanitarian Effectiveness Agenda*. London: Humanitarian Affairs Team & Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, 2016, 42-48.

3. Circularity has become a common theme in humanitarian practice as humanitarian organisations have introduced neomanagerial reforms over the last 25 years. For a discussion of how categories are created and activities designed in order to justify existing categories and activities, see Fiori et al., *Echo Chamber*.

4. Field, Jessica, Anubhav Dutt Tiwari, & Yamini Mookherjee. 'Refugee self-reliance in Delhi: The limits of a market-based approach'. *In Making Lives: Refugee Self-Reliance and Humanitarian Action in Cities*, edited by Juliano Fiori & Andrea Rigon, pp.37-72 London: Humanitarian Affairs Team, Save the Children, 2017. A longer version of this paper was originally published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), as a Working Paper entitled 'Urban Refugees in Delhi: Identity, Entitlements and Well-Being in India's Capital' (October 2017). The research in Delhi was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), through the Urban Crises Learning Fund managed by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). The fund is part of DFID's Urban Crises Programme on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, which involves IIED and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Further details can be found at www.iied.org/urbancrises.

5. Carpi, Estella. 'Learning and earning in constrained labour markets: The politics of livelihoods in Lebanon's Halba'. In *Making Lives: Refugee Self-Reliance and Humanitarian Action in Cities*, edited by Juliano Fiori & Andrea Rigon, pp.11-36 London: Humanitarian Affairs Team, Save the Children, 2017.

6. Dicker, Sophie. 'Solidarity in the city: Platforms for refugee self-support in Thessaloniki'. In *Making Lives: Refugee Self-Reliance and Humanitarian Action in Cities*, edited by Juliano Fiori & Andrea Rigon, pp.73-103 London: Humanitarian Affairs Team, Save the Children, 2017.

7. Human Rights Watch. '"I just wanted to be treated like a person". How Lebanon's refugee residency rules facilitate abuse of Syrian refugees'. Accessed 15th September, 2017. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon0116web.pdf

8. In 2003, Jeff Crisp, at the time a member of UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, argued that 'there is also a need to link the question of livelihoods with the issues of rights and protection'. Crisp, Jeff. 'UNHCR, refugee livelihoods and self-reliance: A brief history'. Geneva: UNHCR. Accessed 13th September, 2017. http://www.unhcr.org/research/eval/3f978a894/unhcr-refugee-livelihoods-self-reliance-brief-history.html

9. Humanitarian organisations can be seen as changing the subjectivity of refugees.

10. Emerging through a hegemonic discursive operation, in this way, self-reliance becomes what the political theorist Ernesto Laclau refers to as an 'empty signifier'. Laclau, Ernesto. 'Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?' In *Emancipation(s)*, edited by Ernesto Laclau, 34–46. London: Verso, 1996.

11. OCHA. *New Way of Working*. New York: OCHA, 2017.

12. Listening more, as part of a 'participation revolution', is one of the ten commitments many humanitarian agencies have signed up to as part of the Grand Bargain. See https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861 (Accessed 17th September, 2017).