
Livelihoods in protracted displacement: harnessing refugees' aspirations, skills and networks

Background and rationale

Opportunities for refugees to make their voices heard and their perspectives known are limited. Equally, aid agencies responding to displacement crises do not take sufficient account of what refugees need even though increasingly there is recognition that programming cannot be credible or effective unless it understands and reflects refugees' perspectives. Feedback mechanisms are being introduced in certain contexts, although these are rarely systematic nor is there the necessary flexibility within aid agencies to adapt programmes accordingly and sufficiently quickly. Efforts over many years to engage in more participatory ways with the recipients of assistance and to listen to their opinions have not succeeded in ensuring that assistance is planned and implemented in ways that accord with the lives, perspectives and priorities of people affected by crisis. Instead, the assistance given by international humanitarian aid agencies is often shaped to a large extent by their own institutional characteristics, which may be quite out of step with the realities of the lives of the people whom they wish to help.

Humanitarian agencies have also largely failed to adapt their procedures and mechanisms to working in non-camp settings. The challenges of working with displaced people outside camps are many: it is difficult to identify beneficiaries simply by displacement status; the objectives of assistance change, because the displaced cannot be thought of as a dependent and maintained population and because they are actively pursuing their own interests; the divide between humanitarian and development actors becomes more problematic in responding to a situation where needs are both urgent and long-term; and the range of institutions, networks and individuals on whom the

displaced depend is much more diverse and harder to identify. Similarly, it is well recognised that most displacement is long-term and that there is a need to address problems faced by refugees (and internally displaced people) as a long-term, i.e. 'developmental', issue.

The result is a disconnect between what agencies provide in terms of assistance and what refugees need or want while they are displaced. Although it is recognised in principle by most agencies that work with the displaced that this gap needs to be bridged by incorporating refugees' perspectives, this has often proved difficult. Political considerations make it difficult to openly discuss particular instances of displacement as potentially protracted or where there is direct opposition from a host country to supporting refugees to develop independent economically active lives. There are also internally derived constraints to supporting the development of refugees' own agency, which have their roots in 'paradigm inertia' and in limitations in understanding the networks and strategies which refugees use.

Several studies are currently being established or conducted on the best ways to deliver support for the long-term needs of refugees in protracted displacement. These studies look at, among other things, evidence for good practice in supporting refugees and institutional constraints to adopting developmental approaches to protracted displacement. However, there is a dearth of understanding of refugees' own perceptions, strategies and networks. To complement other studies, this research will develop a better understanding of refugees' perspectives, the strategies they employ and the opportunities that are open to agencies to support these efforts.

The research itself will not directly analyse policy towards refugees. However, the rationale for the study is precisely its potential usefulness to the formulation of aid policy and practice in two ways:

- In one country, HPG will follow through the research by facilitating a process of reflection and dialogue designed to lead to the creation of new ways of interaction between agencies and refugees. This process will also be documented for wider sharing of any lessons learned.
- The research approach itself should have wider application than just refugees. Although HPG's own research will be limited to refugees, the same methodologies will hopefully be relevant to IDPs and even the non-displaced in protracted crises.

Project framework and methodology

The project will be guided by two main research questions:

- What are the different priorities of refugees in the course of protracted displacement, and what strategies do they use to meet them? How do these aims and strategies change during displacement?
- What opportunities are there to support refugees through a richer understanding of their perspectives, and the roles and perspectives of the people, networks and institutions that are important in shaping their lives in displacement?

In order to answer these questions,

the following sub-questions will be explored:

- Which kinds of people, networks or institutions have been most relevant to refugees in meeting their goals at different stages of their displacement? What have they used these networks and institutions for?
- What role do informal actors play in providing assistance and protection?
- How different are the priorities and strategies of refugees from the priorities which international assistance addresses or supports? How well do international agencies understand refugees' priorities and strategies?
- What are the consequences of any disconnect between refugees' needs and the response provided to them?
- How well do international agencies understand the roles in supporting or constraining the lives of refugees which are played by the people, networks and institutions on which the refugees rely?

Project activities

The project will begin by creating an expert steering group to guide the research. The steering group will include people with expertise in academic research, in policy and assistance to refugees and experts from the refugee community itself. A review of policies, paradigms and practices in assistance to refugee populations in protracted displacement will be conducted, and life histories will be gathered to gain an in-depth understanding of refugees' lives, tapping into the knowledge of a variety of

institutions with experience of working with or studying refugees. Some primary fieldwork will be needed. Proposed case studies are refugees from Myanmar in Malaysia; Syrian refugees in Turkey; and refugees from the Central African Republic in Cameroon, though the selection will be finalised with the project's steering group.

The scope of the research project does not permit the use of longitudinal research to follow changes in refugees' lives during the period of their displacement. Instead, the research will recreate with refugees their 'displacement life history' to understand how their aims, strategies and actions – and their wellbeing – have all changed during their displacement.

The research will be based on a purposive selection of a diverse group of refugees, both in terms of their demography and their experiences. The study will consider as refugees those who have fled across an international border in a context where there is general international recognition of a refugee situation. In other words, actual legal status will not be used to restrict the choice of people to be studied, but rather the implications of different legal statuses will themselves become a potential object of the study.

HPG will seek partnerships with national organisations (research institutes, refugee organisations, etc.) in the selected case study countries. In-depth field work in the two focus countries will study the networks and institutions refugees have attempted to harness, what shapes this interaction and its

outcomes. In this phase, HPG will convene a local roundtable bringing together individuals from various institutions to discuss their roles in refugee lives and to explore options for enhancing the contribution they could make.

In the next phase of the project we will create a learning platform in each case study country for formal humanitarian agencies engaged in supporting refugees. This will involve HPG working directly with agencies to examine their perceptions and paradigms and the ways in which their own institutions shape how they see and respond to the refugee experience. HPG will also examine ways to create space for collective reflection among international organisations, and for exchanges with the (often informal) institutions previously identified, and with refugees themselves. A final roundtable will identify other opportunities for learning between formal and informal institutions, and discuss other interaction, collaboration and coordination.

Because the research is based on just three case studies, no claims can be made to capturing a 'representative refugee experience'. The research is intended to generate broad lessons in how to approach an analysis of refugees' experience, rather than provide detailed recommendations. A wide variety of actors will hopefully be able to derive useful lessons from the analysis: governments, local authorities, refugee organisations, aid agencies (UN, NGOs, donors, etc.) and others. It is hoped that, despite

some differences in situation, many of the lessons will also be useful for those working with IDPs in protracted displacement.

Project timeline and deliverables

The project will take place between April 2015 and March 2017. It will include the following stages:

- **Establishing partnerships: April–June 2015.** A steering group will be established to guide the research project. This will comprise four or five experts on refugees, livelihoods and/or humanitarian assistance from the worlds of research/academia and refugee assistance (policy or operational practice). Research partners will also be looked for in the case study countries, probably from universities or other research institutes.
- **Reviews: April–December 2015.** The project will start with a desk- and interview-based review of existing research into refugee perspectives on livelihoods and assistance, and current attitudes around incorporating such perspectives into the design and practice of assistance in livelihoods and protection. This will result in a short paper for publication.
- **First phase of fieldwork: May 2015–March 2016.** Field research in the first case study country will begin in May 2015 and run until October 2015. Research in the other two countries will be from July until November 2015. This first phase of field work will

focus on understanding through life-histories the elements and networks that are important to refugees in coping with protracted displacement. This will come together in a short report for each study country highlighting refugee lives and networks. The report will be presented to agencies working with refugees in each country, together with refugees.

- **Second phase of fieldwork: February–August 2016.** Based on the first phase of fieldwork, networks and institutions relevant to refugees will be further examined. This will lead to the writing of a short report. A roundtable will be organised in each country bringing together actors from these networks and institutions with agencies working with refugees to discuss ways of working together to better the lives of refugees. Summaries for each roundtable will be published.
 - **Facilitation of reflection and action: April–December 2016.** In the first case study country, where the research will be completed earliest, HPG will hold a number of meetings over six–eight months with the most important actors in supporting refugee livelihoods, in order to see how practice can be improved from any lessons learned during the research. This process is entirely dependent on the interest of these actors. The process itself will be documented and a short report published subject to the agreement of the participants.
 - **Final report: October 2016–**
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February 2017. A single final report for the three countries will be produced analysing how the perspectives of international agencies towards refugees are shaped and the extent to which they reflect the lives of refugees

and the local networks and institutions on which they rely. A policy brief making key recommendations emerging from the research on how support for refugees can be improved will also be published.

- **Dissemination: February–March 2017.** The reports and findings of the study will be disseminated through public events and interactions with relevant policymakers and organisations working with refugees.