

Measuring and facilitating self-reliance

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With durable solutions available only to a very small proportion of the global refugee population, self-reliance programming and the measurement of self-reliance outcomes are increasingly important topics in re-thinking the quality and sustainability of socio-economic integration.

The self-reliance of refugees is a policy objective as old as the international refugee regime itself, although it has received varying degrees of attention over the years. UNHCR has defined self-reliance as “the ability of individuals, households or communities to meet their essential needs and enjoy their human rights in a sustainable manner and to live with dignity”.¹ The concept is closely linked to that of socio-economic integration, while eschewing the latter’s connotation of permanence and thornier issues such as citizenship, which might not be politically viable for host countries and communities.

Over the past several decades, self-reliance has largely been viewed through an economic lens and manifested chiefly as livelihoods programming. These programmes were typically designed and implemented as a means to assist refugees to learn skills, occupy their time and earn some income to supplement humanitarian assistance. However, for the increasingly large portion of refugees hosted in cities rather than camps, there is often little or no aid available and income is required not just to supplement assistance but to fully support oneself and one’s family.

The release of UNHCR’s *Operational Guidelines on the Minimum Criteria for Livelihoods Programming* in 2015 contributed to a progressively sophisticated approach to livelihoods and economic inclusion, requiring market assessments and a clear linkage between vocational training and employment (including self-employment) opportunities. However, a significant gap still exists in measuring the impact of these programmes. Outcomes are defined as changes to income, assets and savings; these are indeed vitally important for economic programming but they fall short of examining whether refugees’ lives actually improve or if outcomes are sustainable.

In 2018, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) – the first global policy to elevate the self-reliance of refugees as a core aim – was affirmed by the UN General Assembly. The 2019 Global Refugee Forum, a pledging and stocktaking forum on implementation of the GCR, resulted in some 1,400 pledges by donors, refugee-hosting governments, private sector companies and NGOs, with 128 pledges focusing specifically on jobs and livelihoods for refugees. These changes in the policy and operating environment indicate a sea-change in how refugee self-reliance is viewed and prioritised, and yet the indicator framework for the GCR again focuses on proxy and narrow measures of self-reliance, such as access to work and freedom of movement, rather than more complex and holistic measures of the concept.

Given the increasingly urban and protracted nature of displacement and the growing sense that refugee self-reliance is a critical component of policy and programming responses, RefugePoint and the Women’s Refugee Commission began developing approaches to measure refugee self-reliance in an effort to inform both programme design and resource allocation. Building on their initial work, the two organisations brought together a community of practice in 2016 – which has now evolved into the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI) – to deepen the humanitarian and development communities’ understanding of self-reliance and collective action towards facilitating it, starting with the creation of a common measurement tool.

Development of the Self-Reliance Index

The Self-Reliance Index (SRI) is a new tool for practitioners and donors to measure whether programme participants are moving towards self-reliance and if so, which interventions

work best to achieve it. The SRI helps move discussions around self-reliance beyond a narrow focus on livelihoods and economic outcomes towards a more holistic view of self-reliance that includes both economic and social well-being.

The SRI was conceived as an easy-to-use tool to measure whether a household is sustainably meeting its basic needs over time.² Typical refugee and humanitarian interventions are sectoral in nature (such as health, food, and water, sanitation and hygiene). The SRI aims to provide a common platform to capture data provided by different actors across all sectors, in order to identify both the areas in which refugees are faring well and areas to target for support.

In electing to develop a simple, multi-sectoral tool, the development team recognised the implicit trade-offs involved. Many sectors, such as food and health, have well-established, comprehensive measurement tools that are accepted as the industry standard for those sectors. The SRI does not replace those tools; it may be used in conjunction with them or as a standalone tool to provide a broad overview of a household's circumstances.

The SRI was developed through an inclusive and on-going iterative process. The initial stages included a literature review, mapping tools that measure related concepts, convening a community of practice, and expert input and testing during the pilot phase with the assistance of over 40 academic and practitioner partners, plus refugee focus groups and key informant interviews. The final soft-launch phase from August 2019 to January 2020 focused on further tool and score refinement, as well as reliability and validity testing.³ Today, the SRI 2.0, launched in May 2020, is being used by 34 partners in 25 countries and by key donors, including the US Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration and the EU-UNOPs Lives in Dignity Grant Facility.

Conceptual framework

The SRI 2.0 now includes 12 domains, four of which (Housing, Food, Education and Health Care) focus on a household's ability to meet its basic needs: that is, the core of self-reliance. The next four domains (Employment, Financial

Resources, Assistance and Debt) focus on the resources needed to secure basic needs and on factors that either safeguard these basic needs or threaten them. The final four domains (Savings, Safety, Social Capital and Health Status) are indicators of sustainability; they measure conditions and assets that may allow refugees to protect their resources and to weather shocks, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be able to continue meeting their basic needs.

In developing the SRI there was a constant tension between including the fewest domains possible to ensure ease of use and capturing sufficient information to gain a solid understanding of self-reliance. This required setting aside some household information (however important) that was deemed peripheral to that understanding. Creating a universal tool also required language that was broad and flexible to allow for use in a variety of contexts. Some early domains were dropped, such as psychosocial well-being, where it was felt that the measurement of this did not correlate with refugee households' progress towards self-reliance and individuals' scores were impossible to aggregate at the household level. The domains of Assistance and Debt were later inclusions, deemed necessary as the former assists refugees in meeting basic needs but does not indicate progress towards self-reliance, and the latter impedes progress towards sustainable self-reliance.

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

Responding to questions and concerns

In considering how self-reliance may be expanded, it is important to understand why self-reliance has not historically been pursued

by the humanitarian and development communities as a high-profile or widespread goal for refugees. Four categories of concerns and critiques emerged from the literature and in discussions around self-reliance and the SRI. Gaining a better understanding of these is essential to finding areas of agreement among stakeholders.

1. Philosophical concerns

Some scholars and advocates assert that the concept of self-reliance is a fallacious, neo-liberal western construct that serves the goals of capitalism and reducing humanitarian aid. They argue that self-reliance is not an appropriate or achievable goal for every person and point out that self-reliance at its best is a fluid, temporary state and that all people experience greater and lesser degrees of self-reliance throughout their lives. The RSRI, under which the SRI tool is housed, supports the expansion of opportunities for refugees to become self-reliant. It does not, however, endorse enforced self-reliance or withdrawal or reduction of aid in situations where it is still vitally needed. Furthermore, while the cautions are well noted, few alternative visions have been put forward for moving beyond the status quo for millions of refugees stuck with no solutions and little, if any, humanitarian aid.

2. Socio-economic versus legal integration

Another common critique of self-reliance is that it risks allowing host states to avoid upholding refugee rights. A 'rights first' approach is arguably what has been tried since the signing of the 1951 Refugee Convention and, despite decades of vigorous advocacy, has failed to adequately secure better legal protections for refugees in many host countries. This approach has also entrenched an overly binary paradigm in which either durable solutions are secured or indefinite aid is provided, without sufficient consideration of the grey areas in between, or of how refugees should survive in the long term while awaiting elusive solutions. The more pragmatic focus of self-reliance (helping refugees live better lives in the near term) is not incompatible with – and indeed must complement – policy-based approaches to secure basic rights and social protections.

In many contexts, we can make progress on socio-economic integration even in the absence of ideal legislative frameworks.

3. Programming and funding realities

Even where there is agreement on the goal and tactic of self-reliance, programming and funding realities have prevented broad uptake of the approach. Primary among these are the entrenched divisions between humanitarian and development work, including differences in funding streams, project timeframes and in the variety of agencies and implementing partners involved. Concerted efforts have been made to overcome these divides. While there are positive developments in this regard, including the increased engagement of development actors in refugee solutions, progress has been slow. Even within the humanitarian sphere, long-standing sector-based specialisations and siloed funding streams have hindered the creation of holistic cross-sectoral approaches.

4. Lack of evidence

A final obstacle to broad uptake of self-reliance approaches has been the lack of a strong body of evidence for what works best in terms of programme design. The RSRI is intended to remedy this. It gathers stakeholders in real time to share best practices, tools, successes and failures. It has also outlined a collective learning agenda to assess what works best, with whom, where and why. The evidentiary concern is expected to be greatly reduced in the next few years as results emerge from current innovations.

Looking forward

The shifts towards self-reliance approaches observed among agencies, host countries, donor countries and other funders are all signs of a paradigm change in the refugee field. Ten years ago, it was hardly possible to have an open conversation about self-reliance in most refugee situations in countries of asylum. The lack of legal local integration opportunities was cited as an insurmountable obstacle and the conversation stopped there. Meanwhile, refugees were trying to make it on their own – many of them getting by through their own

ingenuity and determination, and others with some support. A decade later, there is reason for optimism. The visibility and endorsement given to self-reliance by the GCR provide encouragement to expand approaches while simultaneously recognising the need to address systemic issues and immediate quality-of-life issues.

Self-reliance is not a panacea for today's refugee crises nor an appropriate goal for every refugee in every situation, but it is certainly an important tool in the toolbox of refugee response. The SRI is unique in providing practitioners with a clear picture of what self-reliance (and the absence of it) looks like at the household level, on which programming decisions may be based.

The SRI tool is designed by and for practitioners to capture the most vital household information and is intended to efficiently and easily assess gaps. The SRI does not attempt to measure the enabling and constraining factors in the host environment that impact a household's ability to improve its self-reliance. Other tools are available for that, such as DARA's Refugee Response Index and the Refugee Opportunity Index under development by the Refugee Investment Network.⁴ Beyond informing programming interventions and resource allocation, the SRI's insights should shed light on the systemic barriers to household achievement of self-reliance and thereby better

inform inclusive policy and advocacy efforts. As we learn as a community, further iterations and new tools will advance these efforts, generating further learning and evidence, and allowing practitioners to continually improve our services and support refugees to rebuild their lives.

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1. UNHCR (2017) *Resilience and self-reliance from a protection and solutions perspective* bit.ly/resilience-self-reliance
2. Available at www.refugeeselfreliance.org/self-reliance-index.
3. Seff I, Leeson K C and Stark L (2021) 'Measuring self-reliance among refugee and internally displaced households: the development of an index in humanitarian settings', *Conflict and Health* 15 bit.ly/measuring-self-reliance
4. See bit.ly/refugee-opportunity-index



A Congolese refugee in Nairobi who earns about \$50 profit per month from his retail shop after covering his living expenses. RefugePoint provided medical care, food and rent support, livelihoods training and a business grant before he 'graduated' from the agency's services. (Credit: Alexis Felder)