

By refugees, for refugees: refugee leadership during COVID-19, and beyond

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The response to COVID-19 calls for meaningful and substantive refugee participation and leadership.

The speed with which COVID-19 has spread worldwide has been as extraordinary as the impact it has had on communities. This includes refugee communities, but in very particular ways. From those in remote and isolated camps, to those living in precarious conditions in urban settings, to all whose movement has been blocked by the closing of borders and increased State controls, scores of refugees have been significantly affected both by the arrival of the virus and by State policies implemented in response.

In April 2020 the Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) hosted a virtual international conference involving more than 100 refugee leaders. Participants shared how refugees have been excluded from health-care systems in hard-hit countries like Iran, how the shutdown of the economy in Uganda has made previously self-reliant refugees destitute and desperate, and how asylum seekers in Greece remain in cramped conditions ripe for the rapid spread of the virus.

Likewise, in Amman, Jordan, refugees previously reliant on access to the informal economy are no longer able to feed their families. Anxiety is high in remote refugee camps, like Kakuma in Kenya, and in urban contexts, like Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, due to a lack of information, basic sanitation or any capacity to respond to the pandemic.¹ And UNHCR has issued guidelines² in response to the particular challenges it expects will be faced by refugee women, older persons, survivors of gender-based violence, children, youth, persons with disabilities and LGBTI persons.

Clearly, there is a need for urgent action **for** refugees. But equally important is the need to recognise, support and amplify the action already being undertaken **by** refugees.

Providing support, filling gaps

Refugee leaders and refugee-led organisations have mobilised to provide support and essential information in response to the pandemic within their

regions. In countries around the world, refugees are providing information and training, food distribution, legal support, online mental health support, and transportation for those in need of medical care, and are filling critical gaps in basic services including in health, education and protection. Refugees are also mobilising to raise awareness of how their fellow refugees are being affected by both the virus and by State responses.

For example, in Lebanon, local refugee-led organisations like Basmeh & Zeitooneh and the Molham Volunteering Team are working to support tens of thousands of families in need through providing food baskets, hygiene kits and cash support to pay monthly rents. Elsewhere, the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, one of the GRN's regional chapters, has showcased as part of its #Refugeerise campaign the many refugees and asylum seekers serving as health-care providers on the frontline of the pandemic response. The campaign has included live online events featuring health-care providers answering questions in Farsi, Dari and other languages. And in Kenya's Dadaab refugee complex, whose first case was reported in May 2020, the refugee-led initiative Dadaab Films has expanded its programming to include public health information to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

These localised responses, by refugees for refugees, are just some of the latest examples of how refugees are typically first responders to crises that affect their communities. These responses will need to be more fully appreciated and supported if we are to be able to effectively meet the critical challenges facing refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially where international actors – UN agencies, international NGOs and governments – are constrained by regulations that require them to restrict their movements.

In fact, when the UN launched its Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19,³ it noted that the response would emphasise “the importance of involving and supporting local organizations” especially as the crisis

is “increasingly being characterized by limited mobility and access for international actors”. Yet the US\$6.7 billion requested from donors is being directed to the very multilateral actors that are constrained in their ability to respond. Yet again, refugee-led organisations, even those with the proven capacity to manage donor funds and mount effective responses, are not being included in a direct, meaningful and substantive way.

Honouring commitments to refugee participation

This marginalisation of refugee-led organisations comes just over a year after the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) was affirmed by the UN General Assembly. Its stated purpose is to “provide a basis for predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing among all United Nations Member States, together with other relevant stakeholders... including... refugees themselves”. In December 2019, at the first Global Refugee Forum, States, international organisations and a host of other actors re-affirmed the importance of meaningful refugee participation. Many took GRN's Refugee Participation Pledge.⁴

These commitments to refugee participation need to be honoured and implemented, now more than ever. It is not only the right thing to do – given normative commitments from the GCR, the Grand Bargain and the New York Declaration – but it is also a good thing to do. Many research projects have painted detailed pictures of the contributions refugees make to responding to the needs of their communities.⁵ These valuable contributions complement the responses of international actors such as UNHCR, and their significance needs to be more fully reflected in research, policy and practice.

In **practice**, donors and humanitarian actors should collaborate closely and directly with refugee-led organisations in developing and implementing their responses to COVID-19. This should include direct funding to those refugee-led organisations that have the capacity to deliver and report on their impact.

Refugee-led organisations should also be included as part of the multilateral response to COVID-19, not only as implementers but as equal partners in planning.

In **policy**, refugee-led organisations need to be equal partners in discussions around how State responses to COVID-19 are affecting all communities, including refugees. They also need to be part of the planning for how the international community will continue to pursue global goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals, both during and after the pandemic. As detailed in GRN's Guidelines for Meaningful Refugee Participation,⁶ this involvement in policy processes must be substantive rather than cosmetic, and have the capacity to affect outcomes.

Likewise, **research** on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees must include refugees in all stages of the research process, from design to data collection and analysis and the presentation of findings. The inclusion of refugees will lead to research that is better informed by the realities it seeks to explain and more likely to alleviate the suffering it studies.

These are important lessons not only for our response to COVID-19 but beyond. It remains to be seen if governments, international organisations, NGOs and other actors will emerge from the pandemic willing to recognise the role that refugee-led responses can play, or simply default to the old model of viewing refugees as the passive recipients of assistance. As the global refugee regime seeks to rebuild from this pandemic, it will be important to recognise how strong, meaningful and substantive refugee participation can help ensure that we build back better.⁷

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1. See reports from LERRN partners on local contexts in Jordan, Lebanon, Kenya and Tanzania
<https://carleton.ca/learn/covid-19-updates-from-our-partners/>
2. UNHCR (2020) 'Age, Gender and Diversity Considerations – COVID-19' www.refworld.org/docid/5e84a9dd4.html
3. UN (2020) *Global Humanitarian Response Plan*
bit.ly/UN-Global-Plan-COVID19-2020
4. www.globalrefugeelednetwork.org/pledge/
5. See for example
bit.ly/LERRN-Refugee-Participation-Kakuma-Nairobi;
bit.ly/RSC-Refugees-Social-Protection-Kenya-Uganda
6. Global Refugee-led Network (2019) *Meaningful Refugee Participation as Transformative Leadership: Guidelines for Concrete Action* bit.ly/GRN-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines-2019
7. A version of this article first appeared as 'By refugees, for refugees: Refugee leadership during COVID-19, and beyond' in the Kaldor Centre's COVID-19 Watch blog, 20 April 2020
bit.ly/Kaldor-Refugee-Leadership-200420



#ByRefugees – during COVID-19

In May–June 2020, the Refugee Studies Centre hosted a series of seminars on 'Strengthening refugee-led humanitarian response during the COVID-19 pandemic'. The panellists, which include practitioners, policy influencers, funders and community responders (and of which the majority are refugees), looked at how refugees are responding to the current crisis, reflected on how they can be supported by external actors, and considered the prospects for creating lasting forms of participatory humanitarian governance.

Series conveners: Shaza Al Rihawi, Anila Noor, Najeeba Wazefadost and Mustafa Alio (Global Refugee-led Network) with Alexander Betts and Andonis Marden (Refugee Studies Centre).

Recordings of all webinars available at
bit.ly/RSC_YouTube