

Improving information and communication to boost inclusion and self-reliance for urban refugees

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Evidence from a refugee community-led assessment in Nairobi shows that communication and information flows must be improved to build sustainable resilience and self-reliance among urban refugees.

Access to basic services and to livelihoods, and the inclusion of refugees in the social and economic fabric of receiving countries, are key to enabling refugees to be productive, resilient members of society. In large refugee-hosting cities like Nairobi there may be innovative approaches for supporting the most marginalised urban displaced people, including for example through technical 'hubs', government investment in mobile money technology and online working. Such measures are intended to address urban poverty and youth unemployment more broadly and are open, in theory, to displaced people but in practice refugees' inclusion in urban contexts can remain limited to the informal sector. The supposition that access to services and resources is easy because everything is 'local', and that job opportunities abound in the city, is often incorrect. Facilitating refugees' access to the formal labour market presents challenges in

a country such as Kenya with general high unemployment and economic challenges relating to poverty, inequality, weak infrastructure and access to services and social protection. Furthermore, refugees' access to services is particularly problematic in the urban area where public services are stretched, and because considerable investments in basic services have been focused on areas in and around camps, where the majority of refugees in Kenya live.

Urban contexts therefore present challenges that are different from those found in rural or camp contexts – and far greater attention needs to be paid to how to bridge the gap between urban refugees' expectations and reality. Effective two-way communication between urban refugees and those who support them can improve participation, give refugees agency and improve their well-being, and help them to cope with the challenges of the urban

environment. The more that is known about refugee needs, the more effective and targeted practical steps towards inclusion can be.

A major obstacle to urban refugees' self-reliance is that information and refugees do not easily 'find' each other. Refugees can become isolated and 'lost' in the urban environment, partly because they relocate frequently, making contact difficult to maintain, and partly because they join impoverished, forgotten local communities at the city's margins. This causes barriers to inclusion and creates a 'hard-to-reach' population. A community-led assessment of information and communication needs piloted by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Eastleigh, Nairobi between January and April 2019 and co-designed with a small group of urban refugees makes clear that multiple challenges still need to be overcome to assist refugees in understanding the service environment available to them. Work also remains to be done to assist aid organisations to fill key gaps in communication and information provision.

The Eastleigh assessment

Globally, little evidence exists on the specific impact of urban refugees on the environment to which they have moved and of which they try to become a part, or on refugees' own perceptions of inclusion and social cohesion. The assessment carried out in Eastleigh, a high-density suburb in which refugees of many nationalities join Somali migrants and Kenyan Somalis, aimed to better understand challenges that had already been identified around a lack of feedback mechanisms and the inadequacy of information campaigns among refugee communities. Refugee respondents highlighted a number of points which indicate that communication is key to addressing inclusion and social cohesion:

- Respondents interviewed felt that they had few or no mechanisms through which to provide feedback to UNHCR and partners. They wanted information to flow in both directions, replicating the two-way dialogue that is more readily and routinely sustained in camps.
- Respondents indicated that they lacked information on available local services, including how to access food, medical care, training, education and employment, and where to obtain help after an attack or harassment. The reasons for this include literacy challenges, and posters being in the wrong languages or not displayed in places that they frequent.
- Respondents did not properly understand the role of the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS), with many unaware that RAS, not UNHCR, now handles refugee assistance. Improved sensitisation using different communication channels could usefully convey how services are divided between the two and thereby increase use of the RAS office, although additional challenges linked to travel costs and uncertainty about security and gaining access would also need to be addressed.
- Respondents asked for local, centralised information points giving details of which providers offer which services, and where they do so. In the absence of other reliable information providers, community leaders are the most trusted source of information.
- NGOs train community counsellors from the local community who undertake house visits and reach the most vulnerable urban refugees because, sharing a language, they are more readily accepted by the refugees. Refugees interviewed, however, suggested case management for protection and assistance could be better facilitated by formalising refugee case workers through paid employment and certification. This counselling system could facilitate information and feedback flows between communities, RAS, NGOs and UNHCR.
- Refugees' communication preferences were for face-to-face meetings, telephone (by calling or WhatsApp) or SMS, in their languages. However, the assessment also showed the potential for exploitation in face-to-face communication, where common and other middle men demand payment for information, services and feedback on case files. This was frequently cited as the

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only means by which vulnerable refugees could access the information they needed.

- Refugees are not often able or permitted to use social centres or local resources designed for Kenyans. Refugees felt excluded and saw this as a barrier to self-reliance.
- Specific needs highlighted by the respondents included medical services, access to UNHCR, resettlement and employment.

The assessment was valuable in identifying a local information ecosystem that gives agency to refugees and refugee community leaders. Nonetheless, refugees' role could be even greater. Opportunities exist for changes that would have a positive impact on agency and self-reliance:

- Improving access to existing social centres would reduce the need for refugee-specific centres and provide opportunities to build bridges, improve resilience through strengthening community relations, and support social cohesion.
- The trusted refugee leader network could be further developed, as it is clear that refugee engagement is facilitated by a strong framework of local information ecosystems. Refugee leader networks could be further formalised by setting up structured communication mechanisms such as regular office hours, reliable phone/internet connectivity, and training on how to make referrals (as part of the professionalisation of the refugee case-workers), so that leaders are not burdened

by community feedback and have a comprehensive understanding of where they can direct complaints and concerns. This would improve transparency, accountability and 'buy-in'.

- Information gaps could be addressed through innovative communication methods such as: soliciting community feedback on channel effectiveness; monitoring how information is being cascaded; working with mobile network operators and local media; and by promoting inclusion through radio groups, musicians and social events.

Effective communication is key to achieving the social inclusion of refugees – a critical aspiration of the Global Compact on Refugees. Discerning the difference between unevicenced impressions of what refugees need and what refugees themselves say they need is complex but necessary, especially in the urban context. Better information flow can help refugees engage in the civic life of their community, create cohesion and bring them a wider support network in order to underpin resilience and support self-reliance.

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