

Refugee community development in New Delhi

Linda Bartolomei, Mari Hamidi, Nima Mohamed Mohamud and Kristy Ward

Recognising that process is as important as outcomes, a community development approach can be effective in supporting local communities as providers of first resort. A project run by the Somali and Afghan refugee communities in India shows how this can work.

The critical role of people themselves as ‘providers of first resort’ in displacement is well established. Community-based protection is now a key principle for UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and for non-government organisations (NGOs) but the question of how to support and enhance refugee-led initiatives remains an ongoing challenge. Working with communities to identify what support they want and need from external organisations, and who should be involved in providing this, is critical.

Community-based protection is often seen as something that the community must do by itself, and initiatives that involve other organisations or supporters are sometimes not seen as genuine ‘community-based’ projects. But external actors can play a critical role in supporting communities in determining their own needs and running their own projects. (This role can be particularly important when displaced persons do not have legal rights to establish their own community organisations, as is the case in India.) This means moving beyond instrumental gains for UNHCR and NGOs, such as cost savings and extending the reach of their services, to re-thinking what ‘support’ means and how partnerships can be fostered. Community development (as a distinct framework of theory and practice) has much to offer in this regard as it recognises that process is as important as outcomes.

The Refugee Community Development Project (RCDP) was run by the Somali and Afghan refugee communities in South and North Delhi, India. RCDP was established by the University of New South Wales’ Centre for Refugee Research (CRR), in consultation with the refugee community and with the support of UNHCR. NGO Don Bosco India, a UNHCR-funded implementing partner, provided space for some project activities and in the later years became a local

coordinating partner for mainstreaming community development lessons in broader service delivery for refugees. During its four years of operation (until the end of 2015), the project developed a comprehensive programme of education, women’s support, and livelihoods activities, employing 31 Somali and Afghan community workers and involving 2,100 refugee community members who participated in education classes, women’s social support groups, recreational picnics and income-generating activities.

The project went beyond service delivery. It worked on the premise that explicitly recognising individuals’ contributions in the personal, community and institutional domains is an essential element of enabling protection. This model fostered the agency of displaced people: that is, their ability to evaluate choices, make decisions and take action.

“Most of these women were something in their country – some were doctors, professors, teachers – and after coming here to a new country they felt like they were nothing, so the women’s groups have in a way brought their self-confidence back. They feel important now; they are part of something.”
(Somali female, Project Co-Coordinator)

Elements for success

The project has shown that partnerships with UNHCR and NGOs have much to offer refugee community-based organisations but that these require new ways of working that change their traditional roles in delivering services.

A community development approach: There is a subtle but important distinction between community-based approaches and community development. Community development involves a process of supporting communities to determine their own issues and develop and implement solutions.

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Central to good community development is the involvement of communities as equal partners in every stage of the project development, implementation and evaluation processes. Community-based projects may contain elements of community development. Often, however, they are run with volunteer support from displaced persons but are planned and evaluated by external organisations. Community development requires a shift in thinking about who leads and makes decisions, who sets the agenda, and how power is redistributed.

Refugee leadership and decision making: In RCDP, it was the Somali and Afghan communities who decided what the project would do. Building on the UNHCR Regional Dialogues with Displaced Women and Girls held in 2010-11, they held a two-day consultation with over 200 people, established a 12-person steering committee and developed a community survey undertaken with 300 households. Community workers managed all aspects of the project and initiated regular meetings with UNHCR staff and UNHCR-funded implementing partners (including Don Bosco) to ensure coordination and avoid duplication of activities. Two Co-Coordinators – one Somali and one Afghan – managed the community centre and activities, and provided support to community workers.¹ People in the community have the skills and knowledge to run projects although they may lack the security of legal rights and may sometimes lack confidence, given their experiences of discrimination and exclusion in host countries.

“We can do everything here with little support from UNHCR. This is the feeling that the RCDP has given to people. That still you are human, still you are alive, and you have something to do.” (Afghan male, former Project Co-Coordinator)

Supporting women in leadership roles: One of RCDP’s main aims was to respond to the high level of gender-based violence that women talked about in the UNHCR Regional Women’s Dialogues. The community decided that women’s social support should be a core project activity, and therefore established women’s groups

and adult literacy classes. Three women were elected as focal points for each group, on a rotating basis, to coordinate monthly group activities, and the women attending the groups provided peer support and shared their skills. Women said that that it mattered when they spoke because they were recognised for their abilities to make plans, take decisions and manage group activities.

Cooperation with UNHCR and partner NGOs: RCDP would not have been successful without the support of UNHCR and its NGO partners including Don Bosco and the Socio-Legal Information Centre (SLIC). Initially the project was seen by some as a duplication of existing services but over time the staff of Don Bosco, SLIC and UNHCR came to see a reciprocal benefit. Don Bosco provided local project support assisting the project team in situations that required negotiation with police, government services and landlords; at the same time, Don Bosco could refer vulnerable cases to RCDP and, through them, make connections to the community. Meanwhile, UNHCR began asking refugee community workers to co-facilitate participatory consultations because of their skills and experience, and to assist in providing information to the community about changing visa requirements. Thus RCDP became an important conduit to the wider community because of the trust that the team had developed with both humanitarian organisations and the community.

Appropriate salaries: Community projects often ask people to work as volunteers or for low pay – whether because refugees do not have work rights or perhaps on the assumption that displaced people have lots of free time – but this devalues people’s skills and experience and sets up a hierarchy that places greater value on those working for established NGOs than those working for community projects, regardless of responsibilities. RCDP community workers were paid the same rate of salary as Indian workers in NGOs, in recognition both of their skills and their level of responsibility in managing a community-based association with over 2,100 participants and a significant budget.

What can be learned from RCDP?

Community-based approaches, when underpinned by community development values, have an important role to play beyond filling service gaps. They are critical in recognising the agency and capacity of individuals in displacement. Successful community initiatives are often replicated or scaled up by UNHCR and NGOs as they have the funds and resources to be able to do so but communities must lead decision making around whether the project should be extended, what it should do, how community members will be involved and what type of support they need. This is often a time-consuming process for communities and for those funding and supporting such initiatives. However, successful outcomes of empowerment and self-determination cannot be achieved without adequate process.

Good community development is time-consuming, messy and complex, and cannot easily define clear outcomes and objectives from the start to be measured at the end of a project. Not knowing how things might turn out is challenging in the world of accountability for donor funds. Valuing the journey and its transformational qualities for individuals and communities is critical to the success of refugee-led community-based initiatives. We acknowledge that this is difficult for UNHCR and NGOs, given their policies and the demands of donor accountability, but believe that far more can be done in terms of building the evidence on the basis of which to advocate for far greater donor flexibility.

The RCDP was established as a pilot project with the stated aim of developing and modelling community-led approaches that might be replicated in other similar settings where refugee-led community-based organisations cannot register in their own right. While the Project is no longer in operation in its original form in Delhi, the lessons learned have been mainstreamed across the work of UNHCR and Don Bosco in Delhi who have reoriented many of their programmes and activities to support community-led projects and initiatives. Although the RCDP project office closed

at the end of 2015, remaining funds have enabled the women's groups to continue to meet on a monthly basis, while funding is sought to continue. All those involved in the project are proud of developing and leading a protection initiative that was 'by refugees for refugees' and the protection 'dividends' have been far greater than the activities implemented. We were especially proud of the fact that the project brought the Somali and Afghan communities together in one project.

Community-based responses, however, are not a protection panacea. Alone, they are unable to address the multiple protection challenges that people experience in displacement. The partnership between UNHCR, Don Bosco and RCDP in Delhi illustrated that different organisations should, and can, take on different roles in the same project. In many cases these may also be different from what organisations are used to and can therefore require some reorienting of approaches and building of new skills for all those involved.

Linda Bartolomei linda.bartolomei@unsw.edu.au
Director, Centre for Refugee Research, UNSW Australia

Mari Hamidi basatjan@gmail.com
Community worker and former RCDP Co-Coordinator

Nima Mohamed Mohamad
naimammsahal@gmail.com
Community worker and former RCDP Co-Coordinator

Kristy Ward kristy.ward@unsw.edu.au
Research Associate, Centre for Refugee Research, UNSW Australia

For further details on the project please see www.crr.unsw.edu.au or email the authors.

1. From 2015 the project was led by the authors Mari Hamidi and Nima Mohamed.



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