

Refugee-led social protection: reconceiving refugee assistance

Evan Easton-Calabria and Kate Pincock

The help and assistance that refugees offer each other is central to the lives of many displaced people. Recognising this allows support for displaced people to be reconceived in more sustaining and empowering ways.

‘Social protection’ commonly refers to programmes and policies that aim to reduce the poverty, vulnerability and risks that populations can face. These were traditionally state-led initiatives. The term, however, has also recently become common in international development where international actors strive to alleviate poverty both in collaboration with and in the absence of States.

Social protection for refugees also includes refugee communities’ own efforts to support themselves. Our research in Uganda and Kenya¹ reveals the ways in which refugees are working to support, protect, advocate for and transform the prospects of their communities. This assistance, which we term ‘refugee-led social protection’, includes activities to address vulnerability, such as providing food, shelter, education and health care, but also involves advocacy and the resulting transformation of local and international structures, such as laws and humanitarian systems, which may hinder rather than enable refugees’ access to such provisions.

Refugee-led social protection

Humanitarian actors usually assume social protection in both Kenya and Uganda to fall entirely under the remit of government initiatives, social enterprises and civil society actors. This assumption is deeply problematic and driven by a now debunked perception of refugees as passive recipients of assistance. Despite the increasing emphasis in refugee research and policy making on recognition and affirmation of refugee agency, refugee-led social protection remains inadequately explored by academics, policymakers and practitioners.

Refugees in urban areas are not provided with basic necessities such as food and shelter

and instead must find ways to become self-reliant. However, competition within local economies, discrimination, a lack of access to work permits and limited or non-existent recognition of foreign qualifications can make the pursuit of an individualised form of ‘self-reliance’ extremely challenging. Formal and informal groups and organisations, led by refugees, offer ways for fellow refugees to draw upon and contribute to networks of assistance beyond the limited means of UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and its partners. Our research in Kenya and Uganda has found that these support systems may be organised along tribal, ethnic or national lines of solidarity, as shown by organisations such as the Community of Banyamulenge in Nairobi and the Somali Community Association in Kampala, or can be religious in origin, with mosques and churches across both cities holding collections for refugee families.

In addition to less structured religious and cultural support are formal and informal community-based organisations established by refugees. These organisations take a variety of forms, and some are interlinked with the informal religious and cultural support networks described above. In Nairobi, refugee-led social businesses such as L’Afrikana train both refugees and locals in arts and tailoring, and reinvest profits from sales of their products into projects to support vulnerable children from both local and refugee communities with school fees. URISE in Kampala similarly provides training for young people, including in graphic design, t-shirt printing, music, videography and computer literacy, with the aim of equipping them with the skills to support themselves and build a better

June 2018

www.fmreview.org/economies

future. Other groups such as RefugeeCare in Nairobi focus on distributing food and clothing to refugees in need. Others still, like Kobciye in Nairobi and Hope for Refugees in Action in Kampala, operate savings and loan cooperatives and business training programmes to enable members to start their own income-generating schemes.

Groups such as Tawakal and Save World Trust in Nairobi provide counselling and trauma services to refugees, for whom overcoming trauma and coping with mental health issues is a huge challenge. Other work focuses on political activism; displaced South Sudanese activists work across Kampala and Nairobi to coordinate peace-building activities back in their home country, and the Federation of Congolese Abroad seeks to change the image of the country and advocate for an end to war. These activities constitute social protection beyond the individual scale, as improving the security of countries of origin enables refugees to repatriate, and peacebuilding and advocacy efforts often focus on the building or rebuilding of national social services.

Even within camps and settlements (where formal assistance is more readily available and more easily accessible), refugees also find their own ways of supporting themselves and their communities. One community organisation in Nakivale settlement draws on the professional skills of a doctor and a lawyer, both refugees, and treats lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals in their own homes at night to help them avoid stigmatisation at the camp

clinic. As homosexuality is illegal in Uganda and the camp clinic is staffed by Ugandans, LGBTI people risk discrimination and even persecution if they are identified; this community organisation therefore fills an important gap in assistance to a marginalised refugee group. Wakati Foundation trains otherwise inactive young men in construction to assist with building homes for vulnerable families who would otherwise have to sleep under plastic sheets. And informal Somali women's groups welcome new arrivals and offer food, shelter and kindness to those who arrive when UNHCR's offices are closed.

Many refugees told us that official providers of assistance are usually their last port of call when they need help. Both in Kenya and Uganda, agencies' huge caseloads deter refugees from seeking officially provided services; refugees also have concerns about corruption. The impersonality and lack of real investment in refugee futures that respondents associated with these services were also described as major factors influencing their preference for smaller, local groups. There refugees receive help from people they know, which often fosters a relationship that goes beyond that of benefactor and recipient.

Improving support for refugee-led social protection

Some refugee-led social protection efforts are backed by funding from international actors; since 2009, for example, UNHCR has used its Social Protection Fund to offer small grants to projects that refugees conceive and



These young Burundian refugees in Kashojwa village, Uganda, belong to the Talented Orphan Refugees' Association. "We learn English, we make baskets and hats, we sing together, we play sports together, we're a family now. We sell what we make and share the money with everyone. In Kirundi, there is a proverb that says 'If we work together, we can improve all our lives.'"

implement themselves – so-called refugee self-help projects. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with refugee communities have often been criticised for having a simplistic understanding of these communities that is divorced from wider historical, regional and national contexts. By better understanding the contexts within which refugee-led social protection takes place, the conditions under which external actors can most effectively support or partner with refugees themselves become clearer.

A major challenge reported by many of the groups described here is their lack of access to partnerships with more powerful actors, whose funding and training can offer the groups opportunities to grow, increase impact and become more sustainable. Forming partnerships rather than inviting refugees to participate as implementers or mobilisers for pre-defined programmes means refugee-led social protection actors can retain those characteristics that make them better positioned to reach poor communities.

As well as understanding when and where partnership is likely to be empowering, it is important to note that establishing a transformative social protection agenda – that is, one that not only goes beyond protecting people against the risks associated with being poor but also addresses the structural causes of poverty – requires cohesive action. This need for solidarity can be seen through the building of consortia of refugee-led organisations. Together they can work for common causes and, in principle, networks can be a way to share expertise and knowledge and ‘raise up’ less established organisations. Strengthening networks can make refugee-led organisations more visible and formalised, and can create avenues for advocacy. However, while such efforts to promote solidarity in Kampala and Nairobi are underway, strategic cohesion is difficult in part because of distrust. UNHCR’s implementing and operational partners are suspected by refugees of co-opting the ideas of refugee-led organisations, which can do little to stop it. This makes refugee-led organisations less inclined to reach out to national and international

organisations from which they in theory might receive funding or other assistance. In addition to contributing to the silos in which refugee-led organisations often work, this distrust precludes opportunities for awareness-raising about the existence of this important type of social protection.

There is also a risk that international organisations see refugee-led social protection activities as a means of economising by shifting work onto other organisations (even those that are under-resourced), with the resulting risk that the quality of assistance declines. International organisations and local partners must remain aware of the inequalities between different forms of organisational assistance and take steps to ensure that refugees’ vital work is properly supported and valued.

Our research challenges the idea that refugee-led organisations are fringe actors; rather, they are central to the lives of many displaced people. The role of refugees in providing not only community-based safety nets but also genuine opportunities for change in the positioning of refugee communities as assistance actors cannot be understated. However, the effectiveness of refugee-led social protection is only assured if it continues to be driven by refugees themselves, given that they are best placed to understand these needs. Those looking to partner with refugee-led organisations must preserve and value refugees’ proximity to those they seek to help, or else risk losing what makes them such important actors within the international humanitarian system in the first place.

Evan Easton-Calabria

evan.easton-calabria@qeh.ox.ac.uk

Researcher

Kate Pincock *kate.pincock@qeh.ox.ac.uk*

Research Officer

Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford
<http://bit.ly/RSC-TheGlobalGoverned>

1. ‘The Global Governed? Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance’ is a two-year ESRC-AHRC funded project which aims to document and understand the activities of over 60 refugee-led initiatives across urban areas (Nairobi and Kampala), settlements (Nakivale) and camps (Kakuma). The project is led by Principal Investigator Professor Alexander Betts.