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The costs of giving and receiving: dilemmas in Bangkok

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Local faith-based organisations play a central role in meeting the basic needs of the increasing urban refugee population in Bangkok. This raises challenges for all involved.

The issue of faith-based organisations (FBOs) and their responses to displacement is highly relevant in Bangkok where the number of urban refugees is now estimated to be over 8,000 (more than five times the number in Bangkok in early 2013) and continues to increase. Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention and has no national framework to protect urban refugees. Refugees here live under constant threat of arrest, exploitation and detention, which has a significant impact on their lives and livelihood options. Furthermore, as a majority of the refugee population is relatively new, there is limited organised refugee community support. Thousands of refugees in Bangkok depend on NGOs and FBOs to survive.

The hurdles facing refugees and those serving them in Bangkok are significant. There is only a small group of NGOs providing services and assistance to urban refugees, and for many of them their budgets have either stagnated or been cut. Services to refugees, in particular material assistance, are being withdrawn or are no longer sufficient to meet the growing needs. Refugees are now relying on FBOs, in particular churches, to fill the gaps in material provision that are not being covered by UNHCR or NGOs. Many urban refugees now depend on assistance from churches to survive, and this has presented a variety of challenges for the churches, their mission and their congregations, other NGOs working in Bangkok, and the refugees themselves.

Distorted roles

FBOs have expressed concern about how the provision of assistance for refugees can detract from their core mission and purpose.¹ One church explained that they are responding to a need without necessarily feeling that it

is their role to be providing a formal service for refugees. Any response then draws more refugees to them, and has a further impact upon worship and fellowship activities they may want to undertake. A church pastor explained how their usual custom of eating together after a service became contentious as refugees sought to be involved in that activity in order to access food. This distorted the purpose of this activity, creating some ill-will towards refugees from other people in the congregation, and resulted in it becoming unsustainable. He concluded that: "The needs of the refugees are so great that we could probably expend our entire resources (financial as well as staffing and facilities) toward their care and do nothing else. We don't feel that that is what we are being called to do. We feel we are being led to help but not to make it the focus of the church, which it can quite easily become."

The distortion of roles is also felt keenly by refugees. For many Christians who have fled their country due to religious persecution, they find they now have a different relationship with church attendance. One refugee said, "It feels that we are not going into the church to please God but we go there for other purposes, like getting food or some help or donations... [this is] obviously not good for our mental health, nor for our faith." Another refugee said, "I do not want to feel or become like a beggar... I want to attend church without thinking of going there to get help."

Furthermore, the giving of material assistance can impact upon the freedom of churches to provide purely pastoral care. One pastor commented, "One of the significant challenges we face is that the needs of the refugee community are so great, that our efforts to

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seek to help can potentially take us off track of what we feel our primary purpose as a church is." FBOs can begin to feel like refugee aid organisations, and some church workers who provide assistance have shown signs of compassion fatigue. A number of refugees we talked with felt they were treated with disdain. One refugee said, "It feels so bad when you stand in a line to receive very little food and the way church workers treat you and the way the refugee community behaves there. It's not at all a good experience." Because of this, some refugees say they would much rather receive aid from a non-religious organisation. "We would definitely prefer to receive support from UNHCR or an NGO rather than church. We could go to church with dignity, as we now feel embarrassed that everyone thinks we are coming to ask them to help us and some people really behave rudely."

Need for coordination

The food and financial support provided by the variety of different organisations in Bangkok are usually not on their own sufficient to meet refugees' basic needs. Many refugees therefore approach more than one organisation to request assistance. Typically, each time refugees have to recount the reasons why they left their country of origin, as well as details of their present situation. This raises a number of issues. It presents the risk of re-traumatisation for refugees and also encourages refugees, regardless of trauma suffered, to present themselves as vulnerable in order to obtain the most assistance possible. As one counsellor working with the refugee population explained, "[what is] concerning to me, especially here in Bangkok, is the victimisation of refugees in which a person is forced to embody their story and only talk about the trauma or reason to flee and highlight how they need help from others. This does not promote resiliency or independence." Unfortunately some refugees believe that sharing a traumatic story will ensure assistance. One pastor commented that "what we hear expressed regularly when we are not able to help is that we don't believe their story". She says that the hardest thing is "listening to a refugee's story, then requesting

help, and having to tell them we can't help them". This is problematic for all involved.

Secular refugee service providers in Bangkok too are in a similar position of assessing and sometimes refusing direct assistance to those in need, and can similarly struggle to do this with a rights-based approach. However, they work collaboratively with other service providers, sharing resources and implementing standards. There are regular meetings and structured weekly communications, as well as informal daily interactions. The organisations hold each other accountable, and support each other. FBOs typically do not have the same grounding and involvement in refugee issues specifically, despite their actual pivotal role.

An innovative solution to address some of these challenges has been the creation of the Bangkok Asylum Seekers and Refugee Assistance Network (BASRAN). This network includes FBOs, refugee service providers and UNHCR, and aims to coordinate services for the urban refugee population in Bangkok. Meetings are held every two months and are a neutral space in which refugee service providers and FBOs can hold discussions. Topics vary from organisations trying to better understand the RSD process or what UNHCR's role in protection is, to discussing how to dispel rumours that have bubbled up through the communities. This forum for exchanging information is extremely important to facilitate the spread of knowledge between the various actors who all bring expertise in different areas to the network. This has led to successful, timely and coordinated responses to issues faced by refugee communities. One example is NGOs, FBOs and refugee community leaders – connected through BASRAN – responding to financial extortion within refugee communities; these groups have worked together to assist individuals affected, and to raise awareness within the communities of the risks of exploitation.

BASRAN also has separate working groups on critical issues that require further examination and collaboration among those working with refugees in Bangkok. These

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are currently focusing on education and health, and involve refugees with skills or an interest in these areas, as well as those who have been active in establishing their own community-based services.

The network provides a forum where FBOs are supported and strengthened in their work. For example, FBOs that are concerned about the impact on their mission of providing refugee services and are seeking to move away from providing direct material assistance are encouraged to continue to assist but to do so less visibly, by providing financial and human resources to other organisations running services and activities for refugees.

Communication between all individuals and organisations working with urban refugees is

key to striving for high standards of assistance to better meet the material needs of the population being served, without this being at the expense of meeting spiritual needs. Joint problem solving is vital, and refugee service providers should ensure that FBOs active in the provision of assistance for urban refugees are included in collaborative approaches.

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1. This article draws on views regularly expressed during meetings of the Bangkok Asylum Seekers and Refugee Assistance Network (BASRAN) and by FBO representatives consulted in writing this article.