

Briefing

Urban

Keywords:

Refugees, Urban Crisis Learning Fund, informal economy, humanitarian response, livelihoods, self-reliance, India



Issue date

July 2017

Policy pointers

Aid programmes aiming to foster 'self-reliance' should move beyond individual self-enterprise and focus instead on understanding, and then expanding, community capabilities.

Humanitarian programmes should be flexible and long-lasting enough to cope with refugees' diverse and fluid capabilities, and the complexities of the labour market.

Humanitarian organisations must move beyond quantitative and technocratic measurements of success (eg number of placements), and look at the quality of social relationships (within refugee communities, between refugees and hosts, or employers and employees) as important indicators of social and economic integration.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and NGOs should invest in independent research to better understand the diverse ways refugees experience the city and move towards self-reliance.

Urban refugees in Delhi: self-reliance can't be exclusively entrepreneurial

Self-reliance is, by definition, about individualised responsibility for social wellbeing and economic security. This idea drives urban refugee livelihood programmes, in India and beyond, as aid organisations seek to ensure refugees do not depend on assistance long term. However, ideologically-rooted self-enterprise approaches take little account of insecure labour markets, nor refugees' actual capabilities to transform humanitarian assistance and livelihood opportunities into something sustainable and meaningful for them. The way aid programmes frame 'self-reliance' may overlook or even exacerbate challenges facing urban refugees, especially those with precarious legal status. This briefing explores the issues and shares ideas and recommendations arising from 55 'key informant' interviews with refugees, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees staff and their NGO partners in Delhi.

India has a long history of accepting people fleeing from conflict and natural disasters, and its cities host many people who have felt forced to move, either from within India or beyond, all now living among locals and other migrants. However, the country has no legal framework protecting such de facto refugee groups, nor is it a signatory to either the 1951 Refugee Convention¹ or the 1967 Additional Protocol.² Many of the struggles facing urban refugees in India are well documented.^{3,4,5} While some from these groups settle and work in India, protection and development opportunities for most are limited and changeable, depending on political and bureaucratic exigencies. Services are often only accessible to people matching narrow and variable policy frameworks (see Box 1) or those who have sought refugee status determination through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in

Delhi or Jammu. This legal precariousness, and its consequent ad-hoc protection and support services, mean more and more urban refugees fail to become 'self-reliant' — the goal UNHCR describes as: *'the social and economic ability of an individual, household or community to meet basic needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity'*.⁶

Urban refugees in Delhi

In Delhi, refugees have diverse settlement patterns, ways of navigating services and accessing humanitarian support, and of establishing livelihoods. A large proportion of Afghan refugees cluster in rented accommodation in South Delhi, which is wealthier and less densely populated than the north and west of the city. This settlement pattern is partly

Refugees' variable urban experiences call for a more flexible and longer-term framing of self-reliance

due to historic community ties, to the population's relative wealth compared to other refugees and to the area's broader diversity. The Rohingya, the most vulnerable refugee community in Delhi,

largely live in jhuggis, or slum encampments, near the Yamuna River, because this flood plain region is unsuitable for landlords to develop and so is cheap to rent. West Delhi is a densely populated lower middle

and working class area where Afghan, Chin and some Rohingya refugees live in rented accommodation. Naturally, in all these areas refugees live with local and migrant populations.

National aid organisations offer outreach, education, help finding work and other social services at project sites near the main settlement areas. However, many refugees are still struggling both to provide the basics for themselves and their families and also to 'get on': to find the jobs and attain the living standards that meet their changing needs and expectations. In our interviews (undertaken in Delhi between March and May 2017), refugees, UNHCR and their implementing partners all broadly echoed the same difficulties and disappointments. From their various perspectives they spoke of poor job opportunities and experiences; high attrition rates in job placements; and low take-up for, or interest in, certain classes, training and livelihood opportunities.

Because de facto refugees have no codified legal status, their documentation is precarious, temporary and changeable. This, combined with their broad inability to open bank accounts⁷ and frequent language difficulties, means most cannot enter the formal labour

market to find opportunities that match their skills and aspirations.

However, another factor also helps explain the standstill: the disconnect between how humanitarians view self-reliance on the one hand and, on the other, refugees' own experiences of city life and the actual opportunities they have to do what is important to them.

Unpacking 'self-reliance'

The concept of self-reliance has roots in 19th century US philosophical writings that framed it as self-confident individualism.⁸ Policymakers in the West popularised the term across the 20th century as a political and socio-economic ideal: a blueprint for modern, liberal society in which the individual develops the capacity to look after themselves.⁹ This individualised and liberal socio-economic notion of survival and prosperity has become embedded in the humanitarian sector's efforts to help urban refugees — partly because the refugee regime, as it emerged in the West, framed refugees as workers with specific skill sets that can contribute to a host country,¹⁰ and partly because humanitarian aid, with its restricted budgets, has needed to counter refugee dependency on subsistence allowances.

Leaving aside larger questions over whether promoting individualistic self-reliance was ever the best way to support refugees, such a specific socio-economic definition demands a context-specific analysis. How do those supporting refugees in Delhi frame and foster self-reliance? How do different urban refugee communities understand the concept? What are the gaps between these two perspectives and can these be bridged?

Fostering 'self-reliance'

As the Indian Government largely eschews any obligations for refugees' needs by denying them legal status, assistance is primarily left to faith institutions, local groups and aid organisations. The dominant players are national NGOs linked to UNHCR.

Many run 'livelihood programmes', which offer referred or self-selected refugees life skills training (to help them become more presentable, confident and employable), and then either enterprise grants (which give a few 'entrepreneurial' refugees capital for micro-enterprises) or placement opportunities, mostly in the informal economy. This livelihood programming aims to provide what the Indian economy might need, for example manufacturing labour or workers for the growing info-telecoms sector. Programme staff analyse what skills would fill market gaps, and then assess and train refugees to match the gaps. Inevitably, the size of

Box 1. Refugee protection in India: who counts?

In the absence of a domestic or international legal framework, refugees fall within two tiers:

1. Those recognised by the Indian Government (for example Tibetans and Sri Lankans). These have prima facie refugee status and are entitled to a Refugee Certificate; a long-stay visa; the possibility of naturalisation; land provided by the government; and other benefits including cultural space.
2. Those mandated by UNHCR (Afghans, some Burmese groups, Somalians and other African and Middle Eastern countries). These refugees are entitled to an assessment for a Refugee Certificate; a visa if granted a certificate, though often shorter-term; and the possibility of naturalisation, but this depends on irregular and opaque criteria.

UNHCR is currently supporting around 31,000 refugees, which is relatively few in a country where the official refugee and asylum seeker population is numbered over 200,000 (and where actual figures are probably much higher).

the programmes — often only available for a couple of hundred refugees at a time — mean they can only help relatively few people.

They are also constrained by the 'humanitarian project' model they follow. This entails limited funding (restricting the number of applicants and activities) and timescales that are too short to tackle complex or chronic situations. Programmes target refugees based on assessments of individual needs and a tacit ranking of group vulnerability, which creates competition between communities. Projects also need to achieve specific, measurable goals over defined periods, limiting their flexibility to change and adapt.¹¹ Programmes, for example, may judge their success by giving X number of people life skills training, X number of people an enterprise grant and X number of people placement opportunities. These indicators fail to account for the many refugees who don't make it to, or through, the programmes, or for what happens to the successful 'graduates' in the months and years that follow.

Importantly, this approach also obscures factors that hinder longer-term self- and community confidence-building for urban refugees. For a start, programmes rely heavily on expectations that all refugees are entrepreneurial individuals for whom self-motivated enterprise must be a natural state. They also rely on the urban market as the 'solution' to dependence and poverty. This socio-economic frame implicitly construes 'self-reliance' and 'dignity' as an individual rationally choosing to sell their labour over and above subsistence allowances and/or abject poverty. Programmes frame the urban market as the key (if not only) enabler of that choice — specifically, the informal market, given the barriers preventing refugees entering the formal economy.

Not only does this self-enterprise frame place responsibility on refugees as individuals — "Why aren't they taking the jobs when the work opportunities are there?" — it also discourages criticism of the informal urban economy, despite this economy's low paid, precarious and often exploitative nature. How far can doing ad hoc, often insecure, daily wage labour actually count as successfully becoming self-reliant? This question is not aimed at diminishing aid organisations' attempts to foster self-sufficiency. Rather, it asks how realistic market-driven routes to self-sufficiency are. Livelihood programmes need a degree of introspection on this issue, particularly where the reality is that placement schemes are more geared towards helping refugees survive than to achieving secure longer-term stability that gives them the resources and capacity to cope with shocks.

Poor understanding

Some of these tensions between short-term humanitarian norms and longer-term development needs come from poor understanding of how refugees, with their diverse needs and social identities, experience and navigate the urban environment and its services, spaces, infrastructure and governance. For example, we heard concern from aid organisations that Rohingya refugee women were unwilling or unable to leave their camp-like settlement to access education, training or employment. But some Rohingya women themselves expressed the sense of freedom they felt in a city that allowed you to move. To them, the possibility of being able to leave the settlement felt, in its own small way, empowering. That is not to dismiss the gender hierarchies, urban insecurity and financial precariousness that still discourage (or prevent) women from leaving their camp-like accommodation. Rather, it suggests that aid programmes need to adjust their frames and timescales to account for refugees' diverse understandings of resilience, as well as their variable capabilities.

For Sikh and Christian Afghans, we found a strong sense of a 'social safety net' comes from living in specific (though shifting) parts of Delhi, even where living costs are higher than they might be elsewhere. Historic ties to these areas and the presence of faith organisations — churches, gurdwaras and faith-based community institutes such as the Sikh refugee welfare organisation Khalsa Diwan — are important to this partial sense of urban resilience. Moreover, some refugee groups chose to live a distance away from other refugee groups in order to avoid tensions that are rooted as much in ethnic as in faith-based differences.

These findings suggest humanitarian workers need to use research to explore refugees' experiences as they come from one context (such as Afghanistan or Myanmar) — where freedoms, opportunities and capabilities are framed in a certain way — to another (such as India), with a different set of norms and values, and its own invisible boundaries. A better understanding of these personal geographies, experiences and expectations would help programmes work with refugees' views of themselves and their own capacities, making longer-term programming goals more achievable.

Building 'capability'

The aid workers we interviewed certainly recognise the disconnect between what refugees want and could potentially achieve, and their actual settlement conditions and job

Box 2. The Capability Approach

Economist philosophers Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum developed the seminal 'Capability Approach',^{12,13} which has been most strongly applied in the development field as the 'Human Development Approach'.

The Capability Approach is rooted in the idea that a person should have the freedom to achieve wellbeing, and that this freedom must be understood in terms of capabilities: i.e. the real opportunities a person has to achieve the kind of life they value. It acknowledges that people's individual agency, diversity, and social and environmental factors shape those 'real opportunities'. These factors, the Capability Approach argues, determine a person's real wellbeing, rather than the dominant metrics often used by aid experts, such as wealth, income, goods, etc. It emphasises how two people with equal goods or wealth will not necessarily have equal 'wellbeing' because their 'real opportunities' to convert goods into wellbeing will vary due to social and environmental factors.

opportunities (constrained as these are by cultural differences and insecure legal status). But the rigid and ideologically rooted 'humanitarian project' expectation of short-term assistance, leading to longer-term, individualised self-care, is stymieing progress.

Refugees' variable urban experiences call for a more flexible and longer-term framing of self-reliance and community resilience. The goals need to be less about individual entrepreneurial self-sufficiency, and more about refugees' collective and collaborative ability to convert places, services and opportunities into human wellbeing.

In other words, we need to view self-reliance through the lens of capabilities (see Box 2). That is not to say that livelihoods programming should stop altogether. Rather, humanitarian organisations should be making programmes that:

- Are more flexible and longer-term, and that understand failed initiatives not as a threat to a programme's survival, but as foundations for improvement
- Are driven more by refugees' own capabilities than by market demands
- Focus on refugees' own abilities (ie their 'agency') and wellbeing
- Roll back on quantitative and technocratic measurements for success, and instead

approach market analysis socially as well as economically.

Moving forward, humanitarian organisations should:

- Re-focus financing, research and programming to support, expand and evaluate urban refugee capabilities, such as autonomy, self-esteem and refugees' real abilities to pursue social goals that are meaningful to them
- Develop regular opportunities for refugees and prospective employers to interact, focusing on relationship-building not just job openings
- Look longer-term to explore how non-economic programming (such as through sport and the arts) can help create bonds between communities, strengthen social safety nets, enhance self-esteem and expand communities' capabilities.

Jessica Field, Anubhav Dutt Tiwari and Yamini Mookherjee

Jessica Field is an assistant professor in the Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University. Anubhav Dutt Tiwari is a research associate with the Centre for Human Rights Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University. Yamini Mookherjee is a research associate with the Foundation for Rural Recovery and Development, New Delhi.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU) is a non-profit university that promotes a global perspective and focuses on social impact through multidisciplinary research and teaching.

This paper is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Urban Crises Learning Fund. The fund is part of DFID's Urban Crises Programme on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, which involves IIED and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

Contact

Diane Archer
diane.archer@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback via: @IIED and
www.facebook.com/theiied

This research was funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government.



Notes

¹ www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html / ² www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html / ³ Ghosh, P (2016) Migrants, refugees and the stateless in South Asia. SAGE Publications India. / ⁴ Tufts University, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Joint IDP Profiling Service (2013) Urban profiling of refugee situations in Delhi: refugees from Myanmar, Afghanistan and Somalia and their Indian neighbours, a comparative study. <http://reliefweb.int/report/india/urban-profiling-refugee-situations-delhi-refugees-myanmar-afghanistan-and-somalia-and> / ⁵ UNHCR (2013) Destination New Delhi: a review of the implementation of UNHCR's urban refugee policy in India's capital city. www.unhcr.org/uk/research/evalreports/51f66e7d9/destination-delhi-review-implementation-unhcrs-urban-refugee-policy-indias.html / ⁶ UNHCR (2011) Promoting livelihoods and self reliance: operational guidance on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas. www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/operations/5540a08e9/promoting-livelihoods-self-reliance-operational-guidance-refugee-protection.html / ⁷ One bank does enable this, but with very stringent documentation requirements that preclude many refugees. / ⁸ Kateb, G (2002) Emerson and self-reliance. Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland USA. / ⁹ Goodin, RE (1985) Self-reliance versus the welfare state. *Journal of Social Policy* 14(1) 25–47. / ¹⁰ Easton-Calabria, E (2015) From bottom-up to top-down: the 'pre-history' of refugee livelihoods assistance from 1919 to 1979. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28(3) 412–436. / ¹¹ Fiori, J *et al.* (2016) The echo chamber: results, management, and the humanitarian effectiveness agenda. Save the Children, London. / ¹² Sen, A (1999) *Commodities and capabilities*. Oxford University Press. / ¹³ Nussbaum, M (2011) *Creating capabilities: the human development approach*. Harvard University Press.