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## **HUMANITARIANISM AND COVID-19: STRUCTURAL DILEMMAS, FAULT LINES, AND NEW PERSPECTIVES**

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# Localising Refugee Assistance: Examining Refugee-Led Organisations and the Localisation Agenda During the Covid-19 Pandemic\*

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**Abstract** Drawing on 70 interviews with humanitarians, members of governments, and civil society organisations, including refugee-led organisations, from major refugee-hosting countries in 2020 and 2021, this article explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on humanitarian localisation and international refugee commitments, notably the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). It highlights the work and widening recognition of refugee-led organisations during the pandemic, examining how they could be more prominent within the broader localisation agenda and ways in which the GCR and accompanying Global Refugee Forum may have contributed to some of their greater recognition today. Informant perspectives are shared on challenges to localisation wrought by the pandemic, including limited time, lack of communication with beneficiaries, and constrained budgets, and recommendations are presented on how to further refugee leadership and localisation in the ongoing context of Covid-19.

**Keywords** localisation, Covid-19, refugee-led organisations, Global Compact on Refugees, GCR, Grand Bargain.

## 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted refugee responses around the world. The pandemic has led to the closing of borders and the slowing or halting of refugee resettlement, and short-term interventions that neglect many tenets of inclusive responses. At the same time, the pandemic has put the importance of local communities as both providers of assistance and partners of humanitarian organisations at the fore. There is, for example, a rising interest in the work of refugee-led organisations as humanitarian responders and development actors. Drawing on 70 interviews with humanitarians, members

of governments, and civil society organisations, including refugee-led organisations, from major refugee-hosting countries in 2020 and 2021, this article examines the interplay between policy, humanitarian, and refugee responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and their resulting impacts. It explores important areas where the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated the 'bridging' work that remains to be done between the localisation agenda and international refugee commitments, as evidenced by the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), and the recognition of refugee-led organisations as important yet often overlooked local actors within localisation efforts around the world.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the methodology. Section 3 provides a literature review on localisation, refugee-led organisations, and the GCR. Section 4 follows with research findings focused on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on refugee-led organisations, the role of the GCR on acknowledging refugees' involvement in refugee assistance, and challenges to localisation wrought by the pandemic. Section 5 concludes with next steps and recommendations.

## **2 Methodology**

This article draws on research conducted by the author through two separate research projects in 2020, one a study on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the GCR (DRC 2020) and the other on the role of refugee-led organisations in humanitarian assistance during the pandemic (Betts, Easton-Calabria and Pincock 2020). Follow-up interviews on these topics for this article were conducted in autumn 2021. Altogether, this article draws on 70 qualitative semi-structured remote interviews conducted with humanitarians (21), development actors (12), members of governments (7), and civil society organisations (30), including local non-refugee organisations (5) as well as refugee-led organisations (25), from major refugee-hosting countries in 2020 and 2021, with an emphasis on refugee-led organisations in Uganda and Kenya. Interview informants were selected based on their knowledge and/or relevance to the research topics, with both selective targeting as well as snowballing methodology employed. All necessary ethical review and approval were obtained.

## **3 Literature review**

### **3.1 Localisation and refugee-led organisations**

In recent years, the topic of localisation in the humanitarian and development sector has gained considerable attention, spurred on by the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which recognised 'crisis-affected people' as crucial first responders and localisation as an important way to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of humanitarian aid. The so-called 'Grand Bargain' that emerged out of the summit proposed a commitment for 25 per cent of all humanitarian funding to be provided to 'national and local actors'. The recent five-year review of the Grand Bargain demonstrated mixed results; despite increasing numbers of

signatories committing to channelling 25 per cent of their humanitarian funding to local partners, progress does not come close to reaching the original goal (Metcalf-Hough *et al.* 2021).

While the localisation agenda seeks to bring important but under-acknowledged actors into the humanitarian ecosystem, a key population has largely been missing from it: refugees. Around the world, refugees formally and informally organise to create their own groups, organisations, and networks to offer both emergency and development support to fellow refugees. This includes but is not limited to emergency shelter, language and literacy training, and livelihoods skills. These organisations are often – but not always – small-scale, working directly with communities in particular geographic areas of cities, settlements, or camps (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2020).

Despite the significant work of so-called refugee-led organisations in refugee-hosting countries, the conversation on localisation has mainly stayed at the national level or with local host organisations, leaving refugees as a population **to whom** rather than **by whom** assistance is provided. Indeed, in many instances, the process of increasing the recognition of and transferring resources and responsibilities to these organisations remains parallel to wider localisation efforts despite clear points of connection with wider refugee policy processes.

### 3.2 The localisation agenda and the GCR

The pandemic has highlighted both the opportunity and the need for merging the localisation agenda with refugee policy commitments such as the GCR, which calls for a coordinated and equitable global response to refugee crises. The GCR's aim to promote 'predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing' (UN 2018: 41) provides a framework for addressing crises which induce forced displacement or within which refugees are involved. Through its approaches and core elements, it also presents a global recommitment to uphold and ensure the implementation of the international refugee protection regime – and has arguably been very challenged by global responses to the pandemic, including the temporary halting of resettlement, ongoing border restrictions, and increasing shortfalls in funding for humanitarian responses.

While the GCR is an international policy commitment made by states, affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, it seeks to involve a variety of actors. Discussed in the Compact as promoting a 'multi-stakeholder and partnership approach' (*ibid.*: 14), it upholds whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches in line with the broader localisation agenda. The Compact counts not just United Nations (UN) member states, international organisations, and financial institutions as stakeholders but local authorities; civil society actors, including faith-based organisations; host community members, and

refugees themselves (UN 2018: para 3). While the Compact does not use the term 'localisation' explicitly, the concept is embedded into its approach and the Compact has been called one of the main 'policy-based sources of localisation' (Erdilmen and Ayesiga Sosthenes 2020: 17). Given this, it presents an opportunity to build on wider localisation efforts.

A white paper on refugee-led organisations ahead of the GCR identified ways to include refugees in it, with many recommendations also relevant for refugees' larger presence within the localisation agenda. Alongside funding and supporting the capacity of refugee-led organisations, the paper advocated for the inclusion of these organisations within the humanitarian architecture through inviting them into working groups, clusters, and other structures and mechanisms (Urban Refugees n.d.). This need for formal decision-making power within both refugee policy and practice is strongly echoed by initiatives such as the Global Refugee-Led Network and in research on refugee-led organisations (Betts, Pincock and Easton-Calabria 2018).

On the localisation end, research and practice seeking to advance the role of local actors should more clearly include refugee-led organisations as relevant members of civil society. One positive example of this can be seen in a recent Oxfam report focusing on local humanitarian leadership in Ethiopia's Gambella region (Gidron, Carver and Deng 2021). The report explores the plethora of civil society actors involved in refugee responses, notably refugee self-help groups, refugee-led organisations, and church and faith-based initiatives, with recommendations to build on the government's national commitments to localisation, which include refugee participation, and arise through Ethiopia's role as a pilot country for the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), itself envisioned to be a manifestation of the GCR (*ibid.*). Through this focus on refugee-led organisations as one civil society actor among many with the power to contribute to effective humanitarian assistance, the report exemplifies how commitments to expanding refugees' roles as key stakeholders as per the GCR and actors in refugee assistance can meaningfully converge with the localisation agenda.

The Global Compact on Refugees Indicator Framework (2019), created to monitor progress on the GCR's four objectives,<sup>2</sup> seeks, for example, to measure the 'proportion of official development assistance (ODA) provided to, or for the benefit of refugees and host communities, channelled to national actors in the refugee-hosting country' (UNHCR 2019: 17). On one hand, this indicator is promising, as is what is covered in its rationale:

The Global Compact on Refugees emphasizes the importance of national ownership and leadership. Local authorities and other actors, in both urban and rural settings, are often first

responders to large-scale refugee situations and among the actors that experience the most significant impact over the medium term.  
(*ibid.*)

At the same time, the 'national actors' referenced in the indicator include central governments, local governments, national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as civil society organisations – in short, many non-refugee actors as well as refugee-led organisations. While this indicator is important regardless, the wide range of actors covered within 'national' (similar to what often happens under the banner of 'local') illustrates the need for a corresponding focus on refugee-led organisations within localisation work in particular.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 The Covid-19 pandemic and refugee-led organisations

Somewhat paradoxically, although the Covid-19 pandemic has created enormous challenges for refugees relating to protection, health, livelihoods, and more, it has also raised more awareness of how they help each other. Since the pandemic began, refugee-led organisations have mobilised to provide food, cash grants, and soap to community members; sew and hand out masks; and offer Covid-19 education through videos, posters, and talks in refugees' native languages (Betts *et al.* 2020). Recent research has identified key ways that refugees are and could be assets as local actors in health-care responses, including in providing public information and countering misinformation; supplementing the capacity gaps of international organisations; delivering health care themselves; and being part of virus tracking and tracing efforts (*ibid.*).

Notably, this work by refugee-led organisations has occurred in the face of humanitarians' restricted access to camps and refugee populations as well as troubling situations where refugees have been denied government food aid (as was initially the case for urban refugees in Uganda) or health care, which often necessitated reliance on fellow refugees. In interviews, some humanitarians also discussed how the extreme impacts of lockdowns and travel bans to their operations highlighted the crucial intermediary role that local organisations play in their work. As one member of a major international humanitarian organisation explained in the summer of 2020,

*In many ways we've gone dark due to Covid-19 lockdowns and not being able to directly access beneficiaries. It really shows the shallow roots of a lot of programming. But these issues aren't novel – they are exacerbations of existing issues.<sup>3</sup>*

This stance was echoed by the leader of a Rohingya refugee organisation in Bangladesh, who explained in 2020 that some prominent NGOs did not have the phone numbers of any

refugees within Cox's Bazar, which made it impossible for them to reach their beneficiaries during lockdowns. In contrast, as she worked directly with both refugees and refugee volunteers, she was able to stay in touch and relay information and ultimately provide needed supplies to fellow refugees in the camp.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.2 A rise in funding for refugee-led organisations

Despite the important role many refugee-led organisations play in communities, they are often small and work under the radar of international organisations (Pincock *et al.* 2020). They are often mainly or fully volunteer-run due to a lack of funding, and have limited opportunities to apply for existing grants or other funding sources due to challenges ranging from language barriers to not being considered 'auditable' by many funders (*ibid.*) At the same time, many refugee-led organisations are legally registered community-based organisations or NGOs in their host country and therefore could be formally embedded into the humanitarian system as implementing or operational partners.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to both an increase in funding for refugee-led organisations and in some instances to helpful changes in donor requirements and procedures. Recognising that many refugee-led organisations sometimes provide the only assistance refugees receive, particularly during lockdowns, some organisations and foundations such as Open Society Foundations responded to the needs of refugee-led organisations by providing flexible funding with less rigid and thus faster bureaucratic procedures.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on internal changes made to grant monitoring and evaluation due to grantee's limited time during the pandemic, another significant foundation donor in refugee assistance explained,

*I have seen how [the] Covid-19 [pandemic] has also sped up donor processes to be better administrative partners to grantees. We realised we could do away with a lot of reporting requirements which weren't actually necessary. This in turn could allow us to work with more local organisations and make it easier to do so.*<sup>6</sup>

Longer in the making but all the more pressing due to the pandemic have been new financing mechanisms for refugee-led organisations worth over US\$50m. The Canadian government created, for example, the first-ever dedicated fund to support refugee-led organisations, committing a total of US\$40m (Government of Canada 2021). In 2021, the prestigious Lam Larsen award gave US\$10m to a coalition of six refugee-led organisations to support them in their ongoing work, which is 'rooted in the importance of transferring ownership and resources to refugee-led organisations' (Asylum Access 2021).



### 4.3 Refugee participation and the GCR

All of these efforts point towards a clear interest in elevating the role of refugee-led organisations. While impossible to ascertain, it is interesting to reflect on the role that policy processes such as the GCR, and other efforts towards localisation started prior to the pandemic, may have played in this shift. In interviews, informants often highlighted the importance of the theme of refugee participation present within the GCR and the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, which gathered stakeholders to make pledges to implement the GCR. This was often optimistically linked to widening opportunities for localisation. Reflecting on the GCR and the Covid-19 pandemic, an employee of a refugee-serving international non-governmental organisation (INGO) described the paradigm shift to remote working in 2020 as a positive opportunity for wider inclusion:

*Because of budget cuts and because the ways of working have shifted, the whole issue of working through whole-of-society is being lifted up more. We can't move so freely, but we can work through NGOs easily. So some elements of the GCR are coming more to the fore because of [the] Covid-19 [pandemic]. The whole issue of inclusion has been elevated and I think has improved in many contexts.<sup>7</sup>*

An emphasis on refugees and refugee-led organisations as key stakeholders in refugee assistance has also been maintained by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) even after the Global Refugee Forum. In 2020, for example, winners of UNHCR's NGO Innovation Awards included two refugee-led organisations for their work during the pandemic. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, stated during the virtual ceremony,

*Through this award, we want to give a signal that – more than any other type of organization – refugee-led organisations have proven to be the most important and effective at finding innovative and local solutions to the challenges faced in their own communities during these difficult times.*  
(UNHCR 2021)

Notably, the UN has now created a new partnership status for refugee-led organisations. UNHCR-NGO monthly consultations now explicitly include refugee-led organisations (UNHCR 2020) and a session of UNHCR 2021 Regional Consultations with NGOs specifically focused on how NGOs and UNHCR can 'support organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons to enhance inclusion in Europe' (UNHCR, ECRE and ICVA 2021: 1).

### 4.4 Constrained time and impacts on localisation

However, one of the tensions highlighted around localisation and the pandemic was the incredible amount of time that

many humanitarian and development actors had to spend making adjustments or changing programming entirely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the emotional drain of the pandemic itself. This lack of time and, in cases, of energy was described by some as a barrier to the very work of localisation – even as more and more programming was devolved from headquarters to national organisations and other local actors. As one member of an international agency explained,

*Localisation is not all about funding although often that's what actors want. Parts of it are about greater participation and involvement in the whole funding cycle. I don't know how this has gone with [the] Covid-19 [pandemic] as everyone has been so busy rushing around... the space for consultation is not always happening.<sup>8</sup>*

Similarly, in the summer of 2020, an international organisation policy officer shared that,

*At the start of [the] Covid-19 [pandemic], I thought it would be a way for localisation and refugee participation to progress – in other words, what's described in the Compact – and that it would be obvious given so many international restrictions. But I can't really say that it's changed. In terms of funding, there is quite good progress for Covid money going to national governments and local authorities. But the figures of those receiving funds are tiny for local and national NGOs; refugee organisations that I know personally in different countries are struggling to get much-needed funding. This is key, it's the big issue we need to push forward on.<sup>9</sup>*

#### **4.5 Wider recognition, remaining gaps in collaboration**

This perspective was shared by many refugee-led organisations interviewed, which rarely had directly received some of the increased funding mentioned in the first part of this article. Instead, many felt that their work was disregarded by international and national humanitarian and development organisations prior to the pandemic, and some even as they tried to address the increased needs wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, such as many refugees' desperate need for income generation. As one leader of a refugee-led organisation in Kampala explained in the autumn of 2021,

*Personally, since [the] Covid-19 [pandemic], I think that many things have been disorganised, people from NGOs were mostly focused on activities relating to [the] Covid-19 [pandemic]. It's only in these last two to three months that organisations like JRS [Jesuit Refugee Service] and CARITAS are trying to see how to assist refugees in livelihoods... we have the youth programme, which we want to target livelihoods, but which is having some difficulties due to lack of funding. I tried to reach out to those organisations*

*[INGOs] but sometimes they have a sort of bureaucracy which can take long – but when they are the ones coming with a programme, then it can go fast. They come wanting to target particular groups with a programme that is already set. But when we are trying to ask them if they can assist in one area or another that we propose, they can say, 'Yes' but then they say, 'Wait, we will call you back'. Then one or two years pass.<sup>10</sup>*

Despite the inclusion and participation of refugees encouraged in the GCR, and then necessitated by the pandemic, many refugee-led organisations continue to feel resigned to being 'on the ground' while policy processes directly impacting them happen, again and again, at headquarters far away.

#### **4.6 Moving towards action**

Despite the clear observation that much work remains to be done, multiple INGO and NGO informants described recognising a heightened need for refugee inclusion and leadership within organisations, and a need to reflect on their own processes and practices. Many attributed this in large part as a result of the pandemic, due to a widespread recognition of the limits of humanitarian capacities as the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted programme implementation as well as supply chains. There was an overall consensus that while the pandemic has created an opportunity borne out of necessity for positive change, the effects and outcomes remain to be seen. As one NGO advocacy officer working in East Africa put it,

*There are two givens with the pandemic: in the future we will see increased needs and increased gaps in funding. We as the NGO sector are faced with very few options. But there are some simple ones: how to become more efficient, how to find ways to be more impactful, and also to focus more on niche areas of impact – humanitarian agencies don't need to be trucking water or building schools or latrines. We really need to get off the things that can be done locally.<sup>11</sup>*

It is clear that the rhetoric of localisation and broader publicity about refugee-led organisations must be matched in practice. As one head of a major refugee donor portfolio explained,

*This [is] a moment that will eventually go away, and maybe the humanitarian sector won't go back to the way it was. But the risk is that change won't happen unless we put real advocacy and energy in the nexus between [the] Covid-19 [pandemic], the GCR and the Global Refugee Forum, and refugees' own ability to respond.<sup>12</sup>*

## 5 Conclusion

These findings highlight an increasing recognition of the valuable role that refugee-led organisations play both for refugees as well as within the humanitarian system. While the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have spurred on some of the awareness of and funding for refugee-led organisations, policy processes such as the GCR, the Global Refugee Forum, and the wider localisation agenda have likely contributed, as well. Now two years into the pandemic, over three years since the signing of the GCR, and six years since the making of the Grand Bargain, there remains a need for more critical discussions of localisation, how refugee-led organisations can be more clearly represented within it, as well as how it can occur meaningfully through partnerships and sustainable funding.

Local relevant stakeholders, including refugee-led organisations, must be financially supported to continue their work. Broader remote programming must not become a means to place disproportionate risk on local actors while maintaining unequal power dynamics. The risk of ongoing restrictions on movement, wherein vaccinated humanitarian and development actors from the so-called 'global North' can yet again move freely between countries while their unvaccinated counterparts in the so-called 'global South' continue to face travel restrictions and remain at risk of the virus, must be called out and advocated against.

While increasing localisation and the ability of refugee-led organisations to do their work is undoubtedly important, it is also necessary to recognise the ways that the pandemic may have also more deeply entrenched the unequal status quo. Moving forward with this in mind, supporting refugee-led organisations and the localisation agenda is one piece of the bigger work of allocating the resources, responsibility, and power necessary to uphold rights and keep borders safe and open, as well as to enable local action where refugees remain.

## Notes

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- 1 Evan Easton-Calabria, Senior Research Officer, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, UK.
- 2 These four objectives are: (1) ease pressures on host countries; (2) enhance refugee self-reliance; (3) expand access to third country solutions; and (4) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity (UN 2018).
- 3 Interview, August 2020.
- 4 Interview, Bangladesh, July 2020.

- 5 Interview, July 2020.
- 6 Remote interview with a US-based foundation, July 2020.
- 7 Interview, July 2020.
- 8 Remote interview, August 2020.
- 9 Remote interview, July 2020.
- 10 Interview, Kampala, Uganda, October 2021.
- 11 Remote interview, July 2020.
- 12 Remote interview, July 2020.

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