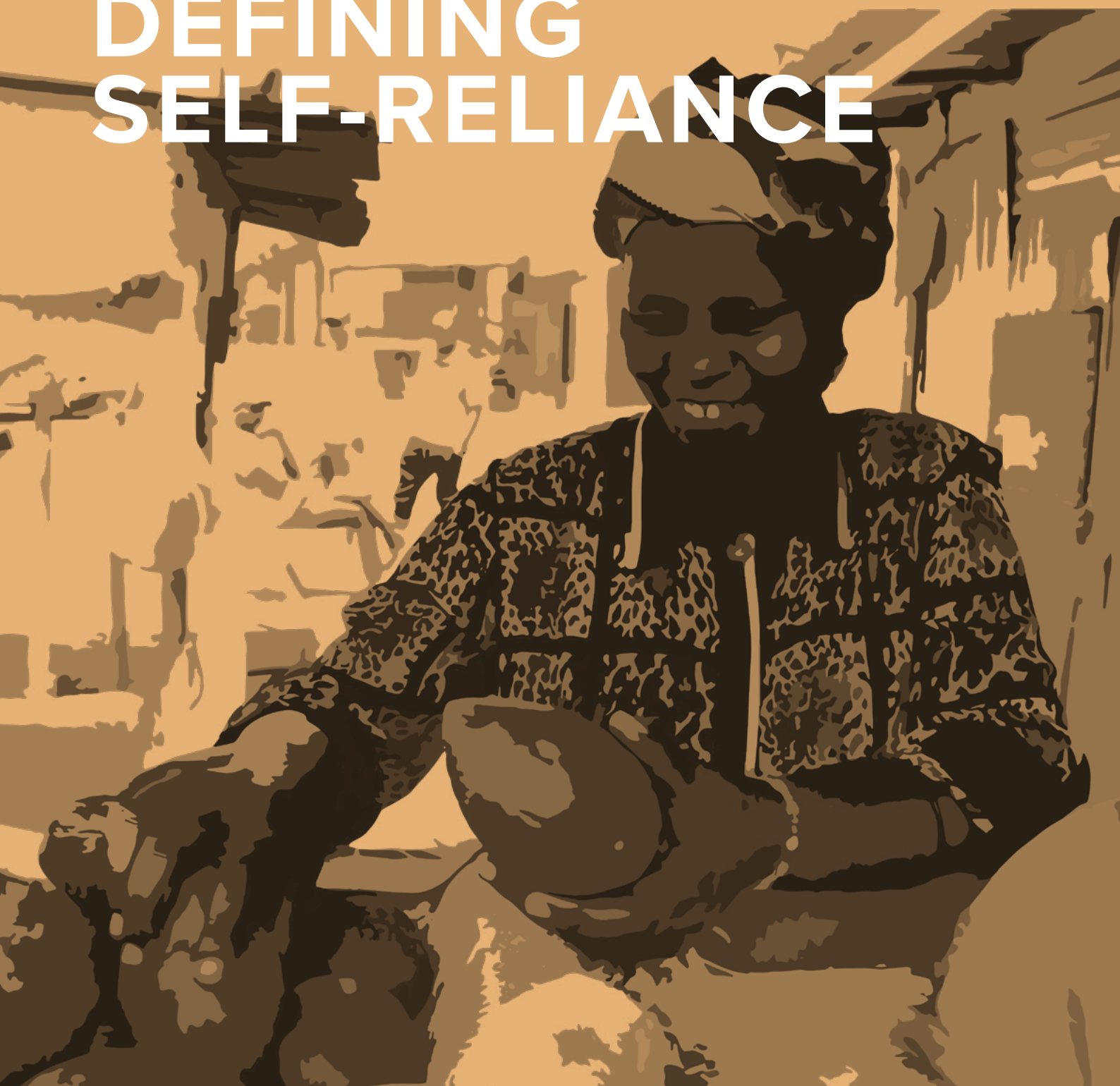




SELF-RELIANCE
EVIDENCE REVIEW

DEFINING SELF-RELIANCE



INTRODUCTION

The Self-Reliance Evidence Review (SRER) is a knowledge-mapping and assessment of publicly available research and evidence relating to self-reliance for refugees.

This study was undertaken jointly by RefugePoint and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), both members of the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI). The SRER contributes to the RSRI Learning Agenda, which outlines core questions to be answered to create an evidence base of effective practices to improve refugee self-reliance. The SRER is also intended to identify gaps in the evidence base on self-reliance, which can inform future research priorities on this topic. The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any of these organizations.

The Self-Reliance Evidence Review and related outputs are available at:
<https://www.refugeeselfreliance.org/evidence-review>

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Cover Image: Claudine, a client in RefugePoint's Urban Refugee Protection Program, sells vegetables and snacks at a market in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo by Alexis Felder.

DEFINING SELF-RELIANCE

In this evidence brief, we present the findings from our review of literature on the definition of refugee self-reliance: How is the concept defined, understood, and used by various stakeholders? What variance exists in the definition and why does it matter?

KEY FINDINGS

How we choose to talk about self-reliance matters: it shapes the expectations, objectives, and approaches of all stakeholders in the refugee response system, including practitioners, policymakers, researchers, funders, governments, and displaced populations themselves.

While self-reliance has steadily grown in prominence as an objective in refugee response, we find that there is not yet a shared understanding of the concept as evidenced by the range of different definitions in use. Moreover, we found that frequently the term ‘self-reliance’ is referenced in the literature without being defined. When that is the case, it is usually implicitly reduced to only one of its many dimensions (most often the economic dimension), which in turn impacts the design and impact measurement of programs and policies.

In the literature, definitions of self-reliance are primarily clustered around use in two areas: policies and programs. The definitions in both clusters are closely related but not equivalent, and both fall short of reflecting certain critical elements related to self-reliance.

Policy-oriented definitions mostly explain self-reliance as a state of not being dependent on external assistance. These definitions often do not specify what types of “external assistance” are being referred to, which can be left open to interpretation. Policy-oriented definitions usually do not address what types of interventions could promote self-reliance.

Program-oriented definitions highlight areas of intervention that can enable self-reliance. These definitions have evolved from solely focusing on the economic dimensions of self-reliance (eg. livelihoods, income generation and/or employment) to acknowledging and emphasizing the importance of other dimensions of self-reliance (social, legal, political, etc.). The most commonly cited definition of self-reliance is one first proposed by UNHCR in 2005, which highlights both economic and social aspects of the term. Yet most programmatic definitions of self-reliance stop short of describing the broader multidimensionality of self-reliance and related programming.

Self-reliance is often conceptually linked to discussions about Durable Solutions, yet there is little available evidence or research about how self-reliance programming can contribute to any individual durable solution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: All stakeholders should promote a shared understanding of self-reliance as part of operationalizing the Global Compact on Refugees, to help set feasible targets and goals for enhancing self-reliance, tracking progress, and promoting collaboration between implementing agencies. In particular, discussions of refugee self-reliance in programming or policy should include an explicit definition of self-reliance and systematically take into account (1) the multidimensional nature of self-reliance; (2) the quality standards that are inherent to self-reliance programming; (3) the various local support systems that enable self-reliance; and (4) the potential of the local context to support self-reliance.

Recommendation 2: Donors should prioritize funding research that gathers refugee perspectives on self-reliance, to help shape the conceptual and operational understanding of self-reliance in general, as well as contribute to better programming design in specific contexts and for specific target groups.

Recommendation 3: Practitioners and policymakers should consider two complementary objectives that advance refugee self-reliance: (1) how to bridge the gap in self-reliance between refugee populations and local populations, and (2) how to contribute to increasing the potential for self-reliance for all populations in a given refugee-hosting area when designing program and policy interventions.

TOWARDS A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

The concept and associated definitions of self-reliance as applied to refugees have evolved over the past 50 years, gaining increased nuance over time. However, while there is a growing community of practice working to advance self-reliance, all relevant stakeholders have not yet coalesced around a shared understanding of the concept. There is significant variation in what encompasses ‘self-reliance’ when described by different actors, both in terms of the objective, as well as the pathways through which it can be achieved. Across the literature, we find that there are two dominant clusters of self-reliance definitions: one that is policy-oriented and the other that is program-oriented. And while the two are closely related, each falls short of reflecting certain critical elements related to self-reliance, which in turn leads to divergences and conflicts in ensuing discussions and approaches.

Lack of definition or too many definitions?

In the last 15 years, self-reliance has been increasingly referenced as a goal in refugee response at the national, regional, and international levels [26; 73; 38; 126-148]. Most prominently it is featured as one of the four key objectives of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees [33]. Notably, there is little debate in the literature about whether self-reliance is a relevant, appropriate, or feasible objective to set for humanitarian assistance to refugees [33; 48; 52; 34; 65]. However, despite the increased momentum around pursuing self-reliance as an objective in refugee response, there is no broadly agreed-upon definition of the term.

There are multiple ways in which self-reliance is defined in the literature, reflecting different and evolving objectives and approaches that translate into substantially different programs and policies, some of which are hard to reconcile [82; 141; 80; 16]. The use of different definitions of self-reliance matters because it tends to shape at least three crucial discussions around refugee issues in the literature: (1) a discussion between humanitarian and development actors about their respective roles in refugee response and related approaches to programming [140]; (2) a discussion between refugee-hosting countries and donor countries on their respective responsibilities vis-à-vis refugees and related policies [2]; and (3) an (often implicit) discussion between refugees themselves and the broader international aid system around expectations and possible solutions to displacement [127; 16; 33].

Different stakeholders tend to focus on aspects of self-reliance that are most aligned with their own pre-existing incentive structure and positioning in regard to refugee responses [67; 101; 12]. These incentives vary by stakeholder and may sometimes lead to opposing interpretations. For example, by understanding self-reliance as “a move away from dependency”, donor states tend to focus on independence from international assistance, which can be linked to considering self-reliance as an exit strategy from humanitarian programming for refugees [12]. Some refugee-hosting states tend to interpret self-reliance as a move away from dependence on all types of institutional assistance (including assistance provided by hosting governments themselves) and may conclude that the aim is for self-reliant refugees to meet their needs only through market systems. For both, self-reliance is a worthwhile goal, but in pursuit of different ends. According to the latter conception, self-reliance programming is desirable insofar as it presents a solution for refugees that also lessens the “burden” on host states [12]. But according to the former conception, a move away from

dependence on international aid is in part made possible due to the inclusion of refugees in national and sub-national social protection systems by host states [71; 157; 64].

Beyond the different definitions in the literature, we also found that many documents refer to the term ‘self-reliance’ without presenting a definition or explanation, which can create ambiguity or often implicitly reduces the concept to only one dimension, frequently the economic dimension [67; 17; 26; 97]. This includes documents that discuss self-reliance incidentally and amongst other topics, but also many documents that center their discussion and findings on self-reliance [70]. Similar to varying definitions, the absence of a definition can also be problematic. This, in turn, has direct consequences on the types of policies and programs that are considered and discussed in these documents, and arguably designed and implemented by their authors. Documents that do not define self-reliance also often tend to conflate the term with other important, yet distinct concepts such as livelihoods, resilience, self-sufficiency, or even local integration [67; 44; 26]. This leads to further divergence in terms of what self-reliance is and how to enable it.

It is also worth noting that while many different stakeholder viewpoints are represented in the literature on defining self-reliance, we found very few attempts to incorporate the perspectives of refugees themselves [95]. While several resources highlighted that self-reliance is an objective that is called for by refugees [95], there does not appear to be any systematic effort to reflect refugee voices in defining the concept, describing what being self-reliant looks like for them, and/or what they need to get there [95]. Admittedly, this finding may be a result of a limitation in the methodology of this research project, which only included English-language resources and primarily included literature published by international organizations and academics. See Methodology & Bibliography for more details.

The lack of refugee voices in the self-reliance definition debate could be considered antithetical to the purpose of self-reliance itself, which arguably relates to creating an enabling environment for refugees to be able to make their own choices about matters that concern them and being able to shape their own future. While several authors point to the lack of participation of refugees and the lack of refugee voices in shaping the definition of self-reliance, there are few concrete suggestions in the literature about how to bridge that gap most effectively [95].

Self-reliance in policy & programming

There are two main ways in which the concept of refugee self-reliance is mobilized in the literature: it is discussed as a policy objective and as a program objective.

Policy-oriented Definitions

When used in policy discussions and contexts, refugee self-reliance is mostly described as ‘a move away from dependency’ [148; 13; 70; 115]. However, as discussed above, there is variation in terms of dependency on what and at times this is left unspecified and open to interpretation [148; 13]. The notion of refugee self-reliance was originally coined to reflect the ongoing dependency of refugees on short-term humanitarian aid designed for emergencies [2]. But self-reliance is also sometimes understood as reliance on support from any type of institution or system, including

host governments, social networks or local community support more generally. To what extent can refugees rely on social services and still be considered self-reliant? Is it sufficient for a refugee not to rely on international aid for one or more of their basic needs to be deemed self-reliant? Can a refugee that relies on support such as remittances or informal and formal social safety net mechanisms be considered self-reliant? These are some of the questions that divide various authors in the literature [103; 116; 125].

Overall, there is an increasing consensus in the literature that refugee self-reliance is about reducing dependency on international aid [148; 13; 70; 115]. At the same time, there is a general acknowledgment that self-reliant individuals – be they refugees or not – are typically dependent to some extent on access to and use of a variety of other systems, including but not limited to market systems and social protection systems [148; 13; 70; 115]. There is less examination of which systems outside of the international aid system (eg. labor market systems and social protection systems or only restricted subsets of these) are most critical for self-reliance and whether refugees that heavily depend on these systems can be considered ‘self-reliant’ [148; 13].

In the literature, policy-oriented definitions of self-reliance are often mobilized to make ‘political’ arguments for at least three different reasons. First, they inherently call into question whether the humanitarian system is fit for purpose, insofar as traditional humanitarian approaches tend to perpetuate a dependency on aid [124; 92; 106]. Second, they draw attention to the role, quality, and sustainability of social protection systems in host states, and whether their coverage should be extended to refugee populations, and if it is feasible to do so [42; 15; 117; 12]. Third, they highlight the responsibility of host governments in providing refugees with the set of rights to which they are entitled, and at the same time call into question the role of the wider international community in sharing these responsibilities [12].

Finally, another characteristic of these definitions is that they typically focus on policy-level solutions and changes to the policy environment to enhance self-reliance and less on programmatic interventions and adaptations [2; 148].

Program-oriented Definitions

There are multiple conceptions of self-reliance that are used to define programmatic objectives or approaches. These range from definitions that solely focus on the economic capacities of refugees to those that emphasize consideration of more ‘holistic’ dimensions of a refugee’s life [128; 66; 23]. Overall, the most-commonly referenced definition of self-reliance in the literature is one included in the 2005 UNHCR handbook on self-reliance, which defines self-reliance along social and economic dimensions [128]:

“Self-reliance is 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.”

Most program-oriented definitions of self-reliance, including the 2005 UNHCR definition, focus on the idea of being able to meet one’s own needs and do not refer directly to international aid (or the absence thereof) [92; 133; 123]. Similar to the policy-oriented definitions mentioned above, this leaves space for some to construe that self-reliance not only refers to independence from

international aid but also from assistance provided by the host state [6; 128]. However, in contrast to the policy-oriented definitions, program-oriented definitions typically point to what self-reliance and related programming looks like (i.e. social and economic components that foster access to basic needs, access to dignified livelihoods, etc.) [114; 145; 101]. In the next section, we further examine the contents of program-oriented definitions of self-reliance and their evolution over time.

An old idea... that has evolved over time

The term 'self-reliance' has been increasingly invoked in the refugee space over the last 10-15 years [23]. Yet, the concept of self-reliance is not new. Mentions of self-reliance related to refugee populations have been traced back to the 1950s for policy use [Crisp 2003]. Humanitarians have been referring to self-reliance objectives for their programs since at least the 1960s [121]. Since then, there has been an ongoing evolution in how self-reliance is defined and correspondingly in the design of related programming, which has shaped the dominant understanding today of self-reliance as a multidimensional concept.

There are three notable phases in the evolution of how self-reliance is defined since the mid-20th century: from a primarily economic focus to considerations about the social and legal dimensions of self-reliance, to increased recognition of the multidimensional nature of the concept [121]. In our review of the resources on self-reliance that were published between 2005 and 2021, we find reflections on each of these phases. First, a significant number of resources tend to focus only on economic opportunities and typically equate self-reliance programming with livelihoods programming [120; 149; 17]. Second, many resources reference the 2005 UNHCR socio-economic definition of self-reliance, however, this usually doesn't involve further explanation or examination of the concept [131; 45]. Third, more recently, there is a growing number of resources that interrogate the notion of self-reliance, emphasizing the need to center refugee voices and context-specific considerations when discussing the concept and recognizing the importance of the multidimensional nature of the concept [23; 33; 52]. Overall, there seems to be a growing consensus that the economic dimension of self-reliance while central to the concept is only one component of a more complex concept [93].

A parallel evolution in programming practices can be observed through the literature. While self-reliance programming was initially and is still in large part focused on economic advancement, the understanding of how to promote better economic outcomes for refugees has gained increased nuance and complexity over time. More specifically, self-reliance was initially equated with self-sufficiency and the 'means of meeting basic needs', which included a focus on nutritional needs and food security programming [20; 123; 50; 51]. Eventually, self-reliance programming shifted to focus on the 'means of making a living' and livelihoods programming, albeit with significant changes over time in terms of what livelihoods programming encompasses [120; 149; 17]. Finally, there is increased acknowledgment that while livelihoods programming is a necessary component of economic inclusion, it alone is not sufficient to enable self-reliance. As a result, economic self-reliance programming has eventually extended beyond a sole focus on livelihoods interventions to also include financial inclusion, with an expanding focus on access to credit and savings [51; 124; 125].

Alongside the evolution of economic inclusion programming, there has been a shift from a purely economic focus of self-reliance programming to an approach that includes other dimensions. First

and foremost, this has manifested in self-reliance programming that includes not only economic but also social components [49]. Similar to how the economic dimension of self-reliance programming has been refined over time, there is an increasing nuance in what the social dimension of self-reliance programming encompasses. This is reflected in the growing variety of concepts mobilized to discuss social inclusion related to self-reliance: the social services that refugees need access to in order to meet their basic needs [12], the critical role of social networks for access to social safety nets but also in labor market integration [48], the impact of various levels of social cohesion within refugee communities and between refugee and host communities [128; 71], the importance of promoting social empowerment and participation of refugees in civil society [62; 109], and the potential for extension, expansion or diversification of formal and informal social protection systems to be more inclusive of refugees [37].

Most recently, the literature includes references to multidimensional, multi-level approaches to self-reliance, which can include individual components of protection, community-level components related to conflict or natural resource management, as well as system-level components around legal policy and advocacy on top of more traditional socio-economic components aimed at the household [109; 148; 105]. There is increased recognition of the role of policies and regulations (whether related to civil rights or legal rights), and of the policy environment more broadly in enabling (or hindering) self-reliance [105]. In other words, there is increasing recognition that the legal dimension of self-reliance programming is also critical, beyond the economic and the social dimensions [109]. In turn, a rights-based approach to self-reliance has prompted more systematic inclusion of advocacy components in self-reliance programming and has highlighted the importance for aid organizations to work with duty-bearers on inclusive policy frameworks for refugees [109]. For more details, see *Evidence Brief - Programming for Self-Reliance (Components and Approaches)*. Nevertheless, while most resources in the literature identify one or more dimensions of self-reliance, few explore in-depth how these various dimensions interact with one another.

A complex relationship with Durable Solutions

In the literature reviewed, the link between self-reliance and Durable Solutions is often mentioned in two different ways: (1) self-reliance is mentioned as an alternative approach to traditional humanitarian programming for refugees prompted by the difficulty of achieving Durable Solutions in the near term, and (2) as a preparatory step for each of the three pathways towards Durable Solutions [44; 12; 127].

On the one hand, the increased focus and interest in refugee self-reliance arguably stems from the recognition that refugee crises are increasingly protracted and that Durable Solutions are inaccessible for the vast majority of refugees in the short term [16]. As a result, there has been a need within the community composed of donor countries, refugee-hosting countries, and development and humanitarian aid organizations to rethink how limited resources available for refugees should be allocated, as well as how the responsibility for these populations should be shared [128; 2; 12]. At the same time, refugee self-reliance programming is also often explicitly formulated as a preparatory step toward eventual Durable Solutions [127].

While much of the literature links self-reliance programming with solutions in general, we find that there is very little discussion of how self-reliance specifically relates to each of the three Durable Solutions.

Self-reliance programming is often presented as ‘solution-neutral’ and is rarely unpacked in terms of how it relates to reintegration, local integration, and resettlement separately and possibly in different ways [100; 37; 108]. The existing ambiguities in the relation of self-reliance to durable solutions arguably result from an implicit tension [108]. If self-reliance programming were to be seen as a step towards local integration (rather than returns for example), then hosting governments might be less keen to support refugee self-reliance and accordingly adopt legislative and policy frameworks that are inclusive of refugees [100; 108]. On the other hand, refugee rights advocates have raised concerns that self-reliance may be a ‘lower standard’ informally replacing the protections and permanence associated with durable solutions [68]. Several resources emphasize the idea that self-reliance programming should neither be considered as a proxy for Durable Solutions nor simply as an exit strategy from providing refugee assistance for humanitarian actors and donors [12].

Author’s note

Self-reliance has become a prominent goal in refugee response and is notably one of the four key objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. Having a shared understanding of the concept of self-reliance is important for being able to meaningfully design programs and policies that advance self-reliance and to track progress, evaluate impact, generate evidence, and to compare the results of those efforts. And yet, in our review, we found a range of self-reliance definitions that focus on different aspects of the needs and well-being of refugees. Frequently, we found that the term ‘self-reliance’ was used without reference to a definition or description of the term.

Examining the conceptual evolution of self-reliance and related programming approaches over time reveals that self-reliance is increasingly understood as being related to more than just economic wellbeing and instead depends on several interdependent aspects of a refugee’s life. The definition most commonly cited in the literature reviewed is the 2005 UNHCR definition that emphasizes social and economic dimensions of self-reliance. Still, we found that the majority of the literature on self-reliance focuses on economic advancement for refugees.

It is therefore difficult to conclude that there is a shared understanding of the term ‘self-reliance’ and more work is needed to arrive at a common definition that reflects its multidimensional nature. As a start, we recommend that any discussions of refugee self-reliance in programming, policy or research should include an explicit definition of the term.

Importantly, it is critical that refugees contribute to shaping the concept of self-reliance. We did not find any systematic efforts to incorporate refugee perspectives into defining the term and recommend prioritizing research that compiles refugee perspectives on self-reliance.

IMPORTANCE OF A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING

There is general agreement that refugee self-reliance is a worthwhile objective, whether for aid agencies, donors and host governments, or for refugee populations themselves [12]. Most publications reviewed for this project take that assumption as a starting point and dedicate relatively little discussion to the limitations of self-reliance. Yet, recognizing that self-reliance is not a panacea, an increasing number of publications have started to critically examine in which contexts and for which refugee populations it is an appropriate and feasible objective [33].

From our review of the literature, we conclude that it is essential for the community of practice at large to adopt a more nuanced understanding of self-reliance, which takes into account not just the multidimensionality of the concept, but also how it inherently encompasses certain quality standards, how various support systems enable and contribute to refugee self-reliance; and how the potential for self-reliance in a given area is dependent upon the local context.

What counts as self-reliance programming?

There is broad recognition that traditional humanitarian programming, be it emergency or ‘care and maintenance’ approaches, are not primarily designed to lead to self-reliance [124; 92; 106]. However, we did not find a clear categorization in the literature of what types of programming can be considered as ‘self-reliance programming’. As discussed above, the concept of self-reliance has evolved towards a more holistic view, addressing many interdependent dimensions of a refugee’s life, including social, economic, and legal aspects. In the 2005 UNHCR definition of self-reliance, these various dimensions are described as relating to the ability of refugees to “meet their basic needs”. Yet, it is important to note that the UNHCR definition doesn’t simply list these needs, but also qualifies how they are to be met: “in a sustainable manner and with dignity” [128; 133].

These quality characteristics provide guidance on what types of programming count as enabling self-reliance. Let us consider for example the livelihoods components of an intervention aiming to support refugee self-reliance (with the understanding that livelihoods is but one aspect of self-reliance programming, yet possibly the most frequent and systematic): not all types of jobs and livelihoods are dignified or desirable. It is possible to meet basic needs while depending on exploitative income sources [128]. The guidance in the UNHCR definition suggests that livelihoods interventions must lead to sustainable, decent, and diversified work opportunities for refugees to contribute to self-reliance [128]. Therefore, the notion of ‘decent work’ as promoted by ILO can be considered a key aspect of self-reliance programming [92]. Self-reliance program interventions must also aim at creating sustainable livelihoods for refugees, that is job opportunities that are designed around real, market-based opportunities [126; 148].

Beyond program activities, these quality characteristics also guide self-reliance policy and advocacy priorities, such as addressing structural barriers to labor market integration by supporting and developing labor market systems and working with and through local private sector actors [12; 16]. See *Evidence Brief - Programming for Self-Reliance (Components and Approaches)*.

Self-reliance and resilience

While sometimes used interchangeably, self-reliance and resilience are distinct, but related concepts [103; 80; 50; 51]. Self-reliance can contribute to building resilience, that is the ability to cope with and recover from shocks. For example, interventions that allow families to save for the future or develop diversified income streams can strengthen their resilience in the face of shocks such as a loss of employment.

At the same time, the 2005 UNHCR definition of self-reliance highlights that it involves meeting one's needs in a sustainable manner, which indicates that it is also related to being able to weather shocks or changes in circumstances over time. In other words, resilience can help sustain progress made towards self-reliance in the face of shocks and longer-term trends, such as climate change or cyclical economic downturns. For example, being connected to community networks such as a local church, or to formal social protection systems such as national health insurance schemes, can provide a safety net during a crisis that may prevent a family from slipping back into dependency on aid.

Self-reliance is a systems-based concept

Defining self-reliance has prompted a reflection in the literature about the various systems on which people depend (eg. market systems, community systems, family systems, national systems or humanitarian systems, etc.) and the role that these systems play in enabling and sustaining self-reliance. When taken at face value, the term self-reliance can be seen as referring to the complete independence of individuals, households, or communities from any type of external support [62]. Some authors argue that the focus on self-reliance is a result of growing neoliberal development policy that expects refugees to only depend on market systems to meet their needs [46]. However, in the literature, it appears that the term is broadly recognized as not referring to a complete disconnect from external institutions or systems in the context of refugee response [46].

It is important therefore to recognize that self-reliance is also a system-based concept- being self-reliance is related to having access to and being able to use a variety of systems that support and enable one to meet their basic needs (i.e. market systems and trade, but also health, education and social protection systems and other public goods, community-based support systems and solidarity, etc.). This becomes particularly evident when considering local host populations in refugee contexts that are 'self-reliant' and all the systems upon which they depend to maintain that status. Inclusive access and effective use of these systems by refugees can be fostered by building and leveraging the capacities of refugees to do so, as well as by supporting, strengthening, or developing the functionality of the systems themselves. The fact that self-reliance is a system-based concept also has implications for the unit of analysis for self-reliance (eg. individuals, households, communities).

Looking at non-displaced populations prompts another observation that helps nuance the understanding of refugee self-reliance- there is no homogeneous level of self-reliance across all individuals in any given society [33; 52]. As in any population, within refugee populations there will always be some individuals that are more dependent on external support and some that are less so

[52]. For example, some individuals with special needs or protection concerns may never be able to achieve autonomy in meeting their basic needs. In fact, without sufficiently assessing needs, in some cases moving towards self-reliance oriented programming could conflict with protection and do no harm principles [57]. This has implications for targeting in self-reliance programming, something which is examined in more detail in *Evidence Brief - Programming for Self-Reliance (Contexts and Populations)*.

Self-reliance is also a context-specific concept

In gaining a nuanced understanding of self-reliance and self-reliance programming, it is also important to reflect on what an achievable standard of self-reliance for refugees could be in a given context and at a certain point in time. For example, self-reliance for an urban refugee in Jordan will look different from self-reliance for urban refugees in Kenya based on the differing economic and political conditions in each country [57]. The broader point to be made here is that, because self-reliance is a system-based notion, the potential for self-reliance of any individual, household, or community in a given area is directly dependent upon the existence, health, and functionality of the various existing support systems [12]. Differences in self-reliance by context are explored in more detail in *Evidence Brief - Programming for Self-Reliance (Contexts and Populations)*.

In that regard, one important assumption behind self-reliance programming for refugees is that refugee populations are less self-reliant than other population groups, insofar as they have less access to the various systems that could help them meet their basic needs, such as market systems, social protection systems in the host state or community-based support systems [12]. At the same time, recognizing that in refugee-hosting areas, local host populations can often be as much or more vulnerable than their refugee neighbors, many agencies include host communities in their programming, with the aim to improve self-reliance outcomes for both hosts and refugees [116; 35; 51]. In that sense, it is also useful and important to consider the potential for self-reliance in a refugee-hosting area, encompassing both refugees and local host populations.

The vast majority of literature reviewed examines specific barriers that refugees face in accessing or using various support systems and subsequently in achieving self-reliance [157; 57; 97; 98; 16]. The most commonly cited barriers that refugees face compared to other population groups include the restrictive policy environment (access to documentation, right to work, freedom of movement, etc.) [157; 98; 16], but also social network effects (that are often lost or weakened during displacement) [16; 39; 81], as well as contextual effects on employability that affect labor market integration (mismatch of skills or lack of recognition/certification, language barriers, biased hiring practices, etc.) [157].

One way to consider the potential for self-reliance in a specific refugee-hosting area at a given point in time is to examine the level of self-reliance non-refugee population groups are able to achieve. Yet, there are limited discussions in the literature about the level of self-reliance of non-refugee populations in refugee-hosting areas, be they the host community or other forcibly displaced populations such as IDPs or asylum seekers.

Such comparisons could serve to set a useful standard for what could be an achievable level of self-reliance in a specific context and at a given point in time. Several authors emphasize that such a point of reference is much needed, in particular, to help manage expectations about the potential outcomes of self-reliance programming and help define realistic targets in various settings [25; 34].

This would also help clarify the objectives of self-reliance programming for refugees as twofold: (1) bridge the gap in self-reliance between refugee populations and local populations (refugee response), and (2) contribute to increasing the potential for self-reliance for all populations in a given refugee-hosting area (poverty alleviation). This distinction further highlights the difference in roles and responsibilities of different actors along the humanitarian-development nexus in self-reliance programming.

Author's note

As part of building a shared understanding of self-reliance, there are a number of important nuances that are worth highlighting.

A nuanced reading of UNHCR's 2005 definition of self-reliance highlights that there are key quality characteristics such as sustainability and dignity standards that distinguish self-reliance programming from broader humanitarian programming. This can provide useful guidance for designing and implementing programming and policies that will be effective in strengthening self-reliance of refugees.

Another important nuance is clarifying that refugee self-reliance is intended to reduce long-term dependence on international aid and not necessarily from all support systems that can contribute to helping people meet their basic needs. Self-reliant refugee households are not expected to be disconnected from family, community or other institutions and only depend on market systems to meet their basic needs. Instead, it is instructive to look at non-displaced populations living in the same areas as refugees to gain additional clarity and nuance on the concept by considering the systems that enable and sustain self-reliance such as general government safety nets, community safety nets or labor markets.

Our review also highlighted that context matters when setting objectives for self-reliance. It's important to consider self-reliance through two complementary perspectives: 1) the current level of self-reliance of a given household in a given context; and 2) the potential of the local context to support self-reliance.

We therefore recommend that discussions of refugee self-reliance in programming or policy should systematically take into account (1) the multidimensional nature of self-reliance; (2) the quality standards that are inherent to self-reliance programming; (3) the various local support systems that enable self-reliance; and (4) the potential of the local context to support self-reliance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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