REFUGEE SELF·RELIANCE INITIATIVE

CLIMATE RISKS AND REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE

Findings From an RSRI Pilot Project

Introduction

Rapid changes in the climate, including more frequent and severe extreme weather events, illustrate that self-reliance programming must take climate change into account. What is needed to make refugee self-reliance programming fit for purpose today – and in the future?

Today, approximately 75% of the world's 117.3 million forcibly displaced people are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, including those such as South Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya, which are highly vulnerable to climate hazards. Droughts, floods, and extreme heat are some of the most common and destructive climate hazards faced by refugees and their livelihoods. Yet to date, there has been far too little discussion of how the international humanitarian and development community can better take climate risks into account when designing and implementing self-reliance programming.

In 2024, the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI) conducted a pilot research project to explore how self-reliance programming can better account for climate risks and hazards, such as understanding how an extreme weather event like a flood impacts refugee self-reliance in a given context. The research asked:

How can the effectiveness of self-reliance programming for refugees be increased given:

- Knowledge about refugees' current level of exposure to climate-related hazards,
- Climate projections in particular regions and countries for the next 10, 20, 30 years and beyond, and
- Existing vulnerabilities and capabilities of refugees and other forcibly displaced people in these areas?

Through learning partnerships with different international agencies' livelihoods and self-reliance programming in Eastern and the Horn of Africa, this pilot research was conducted with the aim of identifying key issue areas to address through a larger research project. RSRI engaged Dr. Evan Easton-Calabria, a researcher on refugee self-reliance and livelihoods, to lead the project. Critically, this research paves the way to identify the type of future programming needed for displaced people given current climate projections.

Pilot Research Aims

- Test the extent to which self-reliance programming is aware of and adaptive to climate risks and hazards (e.g., risk of flooding or drought);[1]
- Document findings across organizations to capture common gaps as well as good practices; and
- Inform the Self-Reliance Index to make it more sensitive to climate risks and hazards and better document how climate risks impact people's ability to become self-reliant.

Methods Snapshot

RSRI partnered with three international organizations implementing a total of five self-reliance/livelihoods programs in Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan. Organizations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with RSRI and engaged in knowledge sharing, in particular through:

- Relevant documentation shared of each livelihoods/self-reliance program (e.g. concept notes, interim reports, evaluations) based on a data-sharing agreement, which were analyzed for content relating to climate risks in terms of both program design and implementation, and gaps where the impact of climate could be more thoroughly examined; and
- Interviews conducted with relevant staff (2-5 staff members per project) to learn more about the program, including successes, barriers/challenges, and future plans.
    - Questions included: Was a risk assessment examining climate risks undertaken? Are natural hazards considered in programming? How do agency staff access weather and climate information, and is the information received perceived to be accurate, timely, and useful?

---

[1] According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a climate risk can be considered the culmination of the interactions of hazards (e.g., flooding), exposure (e.g., people and assets being present in places where they could be harmed), and vulnerability (e.g., the likelihood of being adversely affected). In contrast, a climate hazard refers to climate-related physical events or trends such as an extreme flood or a period of drought.

Pilot Findings

Climate change is heavily impacting refugees' ability to become self-reliant.

Staff across organizations and countries described the challenges faced by refugees brought on by slow- or sudden-onset disasters. These included drought, extreme heat, flooding, and mudslides, all of which impacted livelihoods directly and indirectly: agricultural yields decreased or disappeared, hard-earned businesses were swept away by flash floods, seeds were planted but never grew, and meanwhile, inflation increased in local markets as other harvests and goods were impacted by the climate too. As one staff member described:

> *"The weather now is just unpredictable. Initially, you could know this is the planting season, and the calendar will flow the way it has been. But nowadays the weather is changing – you think it's going to rain, so people plant, but then the rain disappears for the next four years..."*

Climate risks *are* considered in refugee self-reliance programming, but not systematically and not always through a risk assessment.

Projects reviewed and staff interviewed discussed climate risks to varying extents, from the impacts of drought on livelihoods to the challenges of helping already struggling refugees maintain self-reliance after challenging circumstances like flash floods when business assets were lost. Notably, one organization used the Nexus Environment Assessment Tool (NEAT+), a free, open-source tool, to identify environmental concerns and improve the sustainability of their operations. The context where climate considerations were most integrated into programming was in South Sudan, where extreme flooding had heavily impacted project participants. As one staff member explained:

> *"With resilience programming, you always need to consider climate change... Because if you look at the livelihoods of people in South Sudan, they are mostly agro-pastoral, which are heavily affected by climate change... All of the programs we've designed so far have either environmental and sustainability aspects or direct climate change and adaptation linkages."*

NEXT STEPS

Tailored Climate Risk Analyses for Refugee Self-Reliance Programming

Project findings suggest that refugee self-reliance programming would benefit from climate risk analyses included in proposals and as part of project design to determine the impact of climate hazards and environmental degradation on both project participants and projects themselves. Project documents reviewed had little or no mention of a risk assessment that included climate considerations, including in the Graduation Approach, Theories of Change, or for particular livelihoods projects within proposals, such as poultry farming.

Given current and projected climate-related hazards in the regions where reviewed projects are located, an in-depth understanding and consideration of how to develop actively climate-adaptive projects is critically needed.

Precautions against drought for agricultural activities are common, such as distributing drought-resistant seeds, and flood-informed agricultural activities also exist, like the distribution of fast-growing crop varieties to minimize the risk of lost harvests due to floods.

All programs reviewed had some existing adaptation to their agricultural livelihoods programs, including the use of seed and crop varieties more able to withstand local climate hazards. These programs generally also emphasized different forms of livelihoods diversification as both a smart income generation strategy and an important adaptation against climate change. Projects often offered a blend of agricultural production with a variety of crops, poultry or other animal husbandry, and/or small off-farm businesses.

NEXT STEPS

Increase Refugees' Knowledge of Climate Risks and Adaptation Opportunities

Staff across countries expressed a low level of knowledge within refugee communities on both climate-related hazards and climate-adaptive practices for agriculture. There was a perception that these discussions are mainly being held at the national level with government and humanitarian actors but that there is a lack of funding available to bring these conversations to communities.

Addressing the 'noticeable gaps' identified by staff could serve to help both individual refugees consider how to make their own livelihoods more climate-adaptive (e.g., through seed selection or business activities) and also contribute to wider awareness-raising on early warning, early action among refugees for risks faced like flash flooding or mudslides.

There appear to be fewer adaptations to business and cash grants to support livelihoods and little systematic thought on making the Graduation Approach more climate-informed overall. This means there are many opportunities to increase this focus.

While agricultural programs generally took climate hazards into account, other programs or program elements that included cash and grants did not. However, lessons from other areas of practice show the utility of adapting amounts of cash and grants to fit local markets even when they fluctuate; there may, therefore, be positive outcomes on refugees' livelihoods if business support and cash grants are able to take into account both the direct and indirect impacts of climate hazards. This includes both additional support if livelihoods are destroyed by a hazard, as well as an awareness of secondary impacts of climate change, such as rising inflation that is sometimes seasonal. As one staff member explained:

> *"When goods become more expensive [due to drought], refugees can only buy less. Then selling becomes difficult because people are not buying as they are used to. Many people open businesses but then are forced to close them within six months."*

NEXT STEPS

A More Climate-Adaptive Graduation Approach for Refugees

Many organizations reviewed have already adapted elements of the Graduation Approach to make it suitable for refugees, which presents an opportunity for the approach taken to become more climate-adaptive. A variety of resources now consider what a 'climate-adapted' graduation approach might look like. Although these are not explicitly tailored towards refugees, they may still offer useful tips. In particular, based on existing practice and evidence, useful program changes may include:

- Factoring in a local climate vulnerability index into the targeting process to identify the households most marginalized and at risk of climate shocks;
- Conducting tailored assessments to capture participants' vulnerability to climate shocks;
- Regular market assessments to identify sustainable livelihoods for now and in the future;
- Provision of coaching guidance to participants on disaster management, awareness, and coping strategies;
- Monitoring participants' well-being before, during, and after disasters to capture changes and identify specific arising disaster-related needs;
- Graduation coaches linking participants to safety net programs and offering guidance on managing their livelihoods pre- and post-disaster.

Few projects disseminate weather and climate information regularly to refugees, particularly in advance of sudden-onset hazards.

This misses important opportunities to inform refugees to undertake early actions that can save both lives and livelihoods. While the programs reviewed were not designed for early warning, early action in particular, other barriers mentioned by organizational staff included the limited accuracy or timeliness of government forecasts or warnings.

NEXT STEPS

Increase Early Warning, Early Action (EWEA) for Refugees With an Emphasis on Livelihoods Preservation

EWEA is a crucial component of global adaptation to climate change, but countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence, and populations, such as refugees and IDPs, lag far behind in receiving needed investments to prepare for current and future climate risks. Early warning systems range from developing climate forecasts to helping messages about impending extreme weather events reach populations who will be affected. In turn, these early warning systems enable early action, such as evacuating from flood zones.

For example, in advance of flooding, early action to support camps for displaced people must be implemented (as the UN has done in South Sudan, for example) to avoid dire health and livelihood impacts or mass evacuation. Additionally, if long-term climate projections show that extreme heat may make some refugee-hosting areas unliveable (as they do), then we must begin discussions now of how to drastically change living conditions in camps or develop relocation plans to enable people to live safely elsewhere and maintain livelihoods.

Linkages to Global Policy and Practice

COP28 and the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) were the key global policy events that closed out 2023, presenting important opportunities for increasing awareness and action related to refugee self-reliance and climate risks. COP28, for example, was a critically important event for global attention, climate finance, and other assistance to be directed toward fragile- and conflict-affected countries. These are badly needed as 19 of the top 25 most climate-vulnerable countries experience fragility or conflict, and many host displaced people.

As organizations reflect on takeaways and next steps on pledges from the GRF, explicit consideration should be taken of how the climate crisis impacts the four key objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), including that of enhancing refugee self-reliance. These pilot findings point towards practical and needed areas of increased attention that can address both refugees' needs for self-reliance and wider climate adaptation efforts in the countries that need it most.

Next Steps With Research

As a pilot project, this research identified a variety of future research areas to expand on in further work. The next phase of this project seeks to develop long-term partnerships with humanitarian and development organizations implementing refugee self-reliance programming and better track and document the impact of climate-related hazards on refugees' self-reliance as well as on projects themselves. Questions to explore include:

- Do current adaptations in self-reliance programming fit the type and scale of challenges that climate change poses to refugees' livelihoods and well-being?
- Are donors who are currently engaged in refugees' economic inclusion and other aspects of self-reliance aware of and funding programming related to climate impacts on self-reliance?
- What new ideas or different options for 'future-proofing' self-reliance programming exist that aren't being used (at all or enough)?

Conclusion

If the international community is serious about improving prospects for displaced people and delivering sustainable support, identifying ways to develop self-reliance in the face of more frequent and severe extreme weather events and broader climatic change must be a topic of increasing focus. The findings from this pilot research indicate that positive work in this area already exists in refugee self-reliance programming – and that valuable and actionable work remains to be done.

Acknowledgments

This report was written by Dr. Evan Easton-Calabria, Senior Research Fellow at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, US, and Research Associate at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, UK. It was completed with the support of Kari Diener and Shelby Quackenbush.

REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE INITIATIVE

refugeeselfreliance.org

@rsri

@refugeeselfreliance

@refugeesri