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Self-reliance programming in urban displacement: a pragmatic approach or a disillusionment?

BOEL MCATEER AND KELLIE LEESON

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ABSTRACT The promotion of self-reliance for refugees is a well-established policy priority within the global refugee support regime, hosting states and for many refugee-supporting organizations. For urban refugees, there is growing recognition of needs as well as potential for self-reliance support. However, meaningful investments in and commitment to the objective of self-reliance remain insufficient and critiques of the concept as an empty buzzword are many and substantial. This is a dialogue between Kellie Leeson and Boel McAteer, in which they elaborate on empirical examples of self-reliance programmes as either beneficial (Kellie) or counterproductive (Boel) to achieving genuine self-reliance. They conclude that self-reliance can only be wholly achieved alongside full refugee rights. They provide novel views of the concept by framing self-reliance as temporal and pragmatic on the one hand, and, on the other, by highlighting that the "self" in self-reliance often becomes unrealistically accentuated for urban refugees.

KEYWORDS humanitarian support / refugees / self-reliance / urban displacement

Globally, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the organizational body responsible for guiding refugee-related policies, rights and responses to human displacement. Self-reliance was defined by UNHCR in 2005 as *"the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity"*.[1] This definition has subsequently influenced global and national level policies and approaches to refugee displacement and support. The idea of promoting self-reliance to support displaced populations is well-endorsed by the global refugee support regime. As one of four objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (2018) and a key concept within the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (2016),[2] it is a well-established policy priority in hosting states as well as for many refugee-supporting organizations. For urban refugees, there is increased recognition that self-reliance cannot be assumed simply because they survive in the city.[3] However, meaningful investments in and commitment to the objective of self-reliance remain insufficient and critiques of the concept as an empty buzzword are many and substantial.

This is a dialogue between Kellie Leeson and Boel McAteer. Kellie is Deputy Vice President of New Initiatives at the Women's Refugee

1. UNHCR (2005), "Handbook for self-reliance", available at https://www.unhcr.org/media/handbook-self-reliance-complete-publication, page 1.

2. See United Nations (2018), "Global compact on refugees", available at https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Global%20compact%20on%20refugees%20EN.pdf.

3. Easton-Calabria, E (2022), *Refugees, Self-Reliance, Development: A Critical History*, Bristol University Press, Bristol; Earle, L (2023), "Why the international community is failing urban refugees: four myths about protracted displacement", IIED, London,

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Commission and a founding member of the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI). Boel, whose PhD focused on implementing refugee self-reliance through livelihood support for displaced Syrians in Turkey, is a researcher at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). Both authors worked on the Protracted Displacement in an Urban World (PDUW) project,[4] a four-year (2020–2024) study of livelihoods and wellbeing for refugees in Ethiopia, Jordan and Kenya, comparing those in camps and urban areas. They draw on examples from this project in their dialogue, which argues for (Kellie) and against (Boel) self-reliance approaches, aiming to capture both sides of the current debate. Through this dialogue, the authors contribute to literature on self-reliance in two ways. Kellie frames self-reliance as a temporal concept, describing it as a journey rather than a solution. Throughout that journey, she argues, refugee support is required in a range of areas beyond just the livelihood support that traditionally makes up self-reliance programming. Boel highlights how the "self" in self-reliance becomes accentuated for urban refugees, in contexts where their very presence in the city depends on them relinquishing support. They each elaborate on empirical examples of self-reliance programmes, pointing to how they are either beneficial or counterproductive to achieving genuine self-reliance. Both conclude that self-reliance can only be fully achieved alongside full refugee rights.

Kellie: Urban disasters and displacement, from the Haiti earthquake in Port au Prince to the urban nature of the Syria conflict, have resulted in the displacement of millions of refugees to cities in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The urban nature of this displacement has accelerated interest in humanitarian programmes that can fit into the urban landscape, harness existing resources and treat displaced populations as city residents alongside host populations.[5] The UNHCR Urban Refugee Policy from 2009 acknowledges that most of the world's refugees now choose to live in towns and cities, in line with the overall trend of urbanization across the world.[6] Prior to the introduction of the Urban Policy, refugees were discouraged by UNHCR from living in cities and if they did live in cities, it was assumed they were self-reliant and therefore not in need of support.[7] Still today, people living in cities who are refugees typically receive less support than their camp-based counterparts, and often access only patchwork services through UNHCR (legal protection), NGOs, CBOs [community-based organizations] and municipal services.[8] However, there is at the same time greater economic potential for refugee self-reliance in cities than in camps.[9] This being the case, an increased focus on self-reliance programming can extend much-needed support to urban refugees who are neglected today and can help refugees to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the city.

Boel: Despite the potential for greater recognition of urban refugees through an increased focus on self-reliance, refugee support aiming to create self-reliance is still often provided only within refugee camps, which defeats the purpose of promoting self-reliance as a long-term goal. Self-reliance support, whether in

available at https://www.iied.org/21631iied.

4. PDUW is a mixed-methods project based on a survey ($N = 3{,}981$) with displaced and hosts living in both camps and cities; qualitative interviews with refugees about their well-being; and qualitative interviews with refugee and host entrepreneurs about their businesses. In addition to refugees in Ethiopia, Jordan and Kenya, the project also includes IDPs in Afghanistan. For a full methodology please see the project's country working papers available at https://www.protracteddisplacement.org.

5. Crisp, J (2021), "The Syrian emergency: a catalyst for change in the international refugee regime", *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol 34, No 2, pages 1441–1453; Earle, L (2017), "Addressing urban crises: bridging the humanitarian–development divide", ICRC, available at https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irc_97_901-13.pdf.

6. UNHCR (2009), "UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas", available at https://www.unhcr.org/uk/media/unhcr-policy-refugee-protection-and-solutions-urban-areas.

7. Crawford, N J W (2022), "UNHCR's first urban refugee policy, 25 years on", Refugee History Blog, available at http://refugeehistory.org/blog/2022/5/26/unhcrs-first-urban-refugee-policy-25-years-on; Crisp, J (2017), "Finding space for protection: an inside account of the evolution of UNHCR's urban refugee policy", *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees / Refuge: Revue Canadienne Sur Les Réfugiés* Vol 33, No 1, pages 87–96; Earle, L (2023), "Why the international community is failing urban refugees: four myths about protracted displacement", IIED, London, available at https://www.iied.org/21631iied.

8. Crisp, J (2017), "Finding space for protection: an inside account of the evolution of UNHCR's urban refugee policy", *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees / Refuge: Revue Canadienne Sur Les Réfugiés*

camps or elsewhere, is often implemented in the form of job training or cash-for-work initiatives, which are short-term by nature, particularly in camp contexts.[10] Overall, as Eason-Calabria puts it, *"livelihoods creation is presented in current discourse as a main way for refugees to attain self-reliance"*[11] and the practical emphasis is on livelihoods programming. As a result of this, according to the Protracted Displacement in an Urban World (PDUW) project survey from 2021, most Somali refugees who are employed in Dadaab camp in Kenya through livelihoods programmes with various NGOs are in fact working for small incentives rather than for salaries. Thirty-three per cent of men and 16 per cent of women surveyed in Dadaab stated that they earn money from work, and a large proportion of those were working within cash-for-work programmes run by NGOs within the camp. Additionally, refugees selling goods within the camp markets were dependent on the purchasing power of aid-based cash support in order to operate. This means, as my colleagues and I stated in a paper last year, that *"the camp economy depends on humanitarian presence and assistance, which undermines its long-term viability"*.[12] From the perspective of support providers, too, the sustainability of this kind of livelihood support – the argument that it is better to teach someone to fish than to give them fish to eat – is difficult to achieve within refugee camps, given the very limited and often aid-driven economic environment.[13] While self-reliance support for refugees within camps may well be beneficial and enjoyable for individuals, it offers little or no change to their overall situation.

Kellie: We can agree that even though self-reliance is discussed and even promoted in camp settings, there are severe limitations and at times unrealistic expectations regarding what can be achieved there. However, it is important to recognize that self-reliance is also a priority for refugees themselves. Interviews from the PDUW project illustrated that many refugees seek support that will enable them to work, which is often seen as empowering, self-fulfilling and helpful in rebuilding a sense of purpose following displacement. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, many of the Tigrinya Eritrean refugees who took part in the PDUW study had relocated from a camp to the capital by obtaining the Out of Camp Policy (OCP) status, which allows them to reside in the city but does not confer the right to work.[14] Many of the refugees found this situation frustrating and described in their interviews their feelings around not being permitted to work. One woman said she had worked her whole life, and because she is not able to work as a refugee *"the life that I'm living now is like hell for me"*. Another said she wished to be *"a person with limbs"*, an expression in Tigrinya to describe a capable person; someone who can work and support themselves. This sentiment was echoed by a Syrian refugee woman living in Amman, Jordan: *"I don't like someone to provide for me. I'm not one of those people who want to go to a country where they can receive a monthly salary and stay at home. I don't want to stay at home, I wasn't born to do just that. [. . .] I*

Vol 33, No 1, pages 87–96; Fiori, J, A Rigon, E Carpi, S Dicker, J Field, Y Mookherjee, A D Tiwari, F Espada, C Boano and C Johnson (2017), "Overview: refugee self-reliance in urban markets – Halba, Delhi, and Thessaloniki", in J Fiori and A Rigon (editors), *Making Lives*, available at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/sites/bartlett_development/files/making-lives.pdf, page 105.

9. Earle, L (2023), "Why the international community is failing urban refugees: four myths about protracted displacement", IIED, London, available at https://www.iied.org/21631iied.

10. Crisp, J (2003), "No solution in sight: the problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* Vol 22, No 4, pages 114–150; Crisp, J, T Morris and H Refstie (2012), "Displacement in urban areas: new challenges, new partnerships", *Disasters* Vol 36, No 1, pages 23–42.

11. Easton-Calabria, E (2022), *Refugees, Self-Reliance, Development: A Critical History*, Bristol University Press, Bristol, page 4.

12. McAteer, B, P García Amado, A Krisciunaite and M Owiso (2023), "Somali refugees in Kenya: increasing camp-urban mobility", IIED, London, available at https://www.iied.org/22186iied, page 35.

13. Long, K (2014), "Rethinking durable solutions", in E Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G Loescher, K Long and N Sigona (editors), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Migration Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Milner, J (2014), "Protracted refugee situations", in E Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G Loescher, K Long and N Sigona (editors), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Migration Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Ward, P (2014), "Refugee cities: reflections on the development and impact of UNHCR urban refugee policy in the Middle East", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* Vol 33, No 1, pages 77–93.

14. García Amado, P, B McAteer, A Krisciunaite and A Brown (2023), "Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia: building urban solutions", IIED, London,

don't want assistance from UNHCR or anything else, not at all, I just want my rights as a normal person."

Boel: Even if refugees themselves want to live without relying on aid, this is not always practicable. Aid agencies do at times simply withdraw support with the assumption that this will lead to refugees being self-reliant. Limiting or withholding support, in the name of self-reliance,[15] is even more common in the case of urban refugees,[16] despite the increased urban focus that prioritizing self-reliance has contributed to. As demonstrated by the PDUW project, the fact remains that most urban refugees receive no aid, or significantly less than their camp-based counterparts, while camp-based refugees often struggle to find work.[17] In Kenya and Ethiopia, most refugees are required to demonstrate some level of economic self-sufficiency to obtain permission to live in a city rather than a camp. This further reinforces the notion that being left to fend for oneself is the equivalent of self-reliance. This results in a catch-22 situation, where refugees need to demonstrate self-reliance in order to gain formal access to the urban labour markets which might make them so. Consequently, many refugees live in cities without having first acquired the necessary documentation, which makes it even harder for them to become self-reliant. They not only lack support from aid, but also from city authorities and service providers, who may not be aware of their presence in the city.[18] For refugees, the risk is that being "self-reliant" is taken too literally to mean relying *only* on oneself. This should not be the goal in a world where most human beings have institutionalized support structures available to them. The more likely scenario for these urban refugees is a reliance on informal support networks, which are then used as an excuse by agencies to withdraw support.[19]

Kellie: There is a variety of reasons for limited service provision for urban refugees, which can include a lack of coordination among diverse service providers, limited outreach or efforts to integrate refugees, when possible, into municipal or national systems. There can also be complications with identity documents and even the assumption that these documents are not needed.[20] In addition, the lack of funding for urban refugees is a very real constraint, especially when this competes with funding for camp-based services. Both service providers and donors recognize that refugees in camps are almost exclusively reliant on support. Supports such as cash vouchers may meet the immediate basic needs of urban refugees but are not designed to ensure long-term stability.[21] At the same time, single interventions such as skills training programmes may have the goal of supporting refugee self-reliance but may fail to take account of the barriers that prevent refugees from then using their skills to become self-reliant. If someone receives skills training, for example, but is then unable to acquire documentation, they may not be able to set up a bank account, apply for necessary certification,

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15. Omata, N (2017), *The Myth of Self-Reliance: Economic Lives Inside a Liberian Refugee Camp*, Berghahn Books, New York.

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or place their child in school to obtain childcare. They may also be harassed by police on their way to work.[22] Refugees in many countries face barriers to accessing services that may be readily available to nationals. Self-reliance programming, if designed well, can identify barriers and help refugees to navigate the challenges to get back on their feet. Well-designed programming includes well-trained staff, holistic or targeted case management based on need, language support and client follow-up.[23]

Boel: In practice, despite the range of issues for urban refugees that impact on their self-reliance, most humanitarian and developmental support for refugee self-reliance tends to focus solely on livelihoods and labour market inclusion.[24] This type of support often aims to address needs within the economy itself, to provide refugees with jobs where there is labour market demand.[25] The risk is that the needs of the market economy trump the needs and well-being of the refugees.

Kellie: The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI) was created, in part, to address this limited view of self-reliance as livelihood access. As a concept, self-reliance can and has been weaponized when urban refugees are expected to support themselves with the worst possible jobs, and without access to basic services available to citizen city residents. The hope is that the RSRI and the conversations it is helping to lead in spaces such as the Global Refugee Forum will expand what is meant by self-reliance rather than reduce it. Self-reliance is a helpful organizing frame, whether for refugees or support organizations, in advocating for refugee rights; it is also a useful concept for organizations aiming to provide support to refugees particularly in urban areas where support for refugees is often patchy and ad hoc. When self-reliance is framed to include more than just basic needs and job access, it can help identify and address real gaps that prevent refugees from living full and rewarding lives. Often, the barriers are not purely about access to livelihoods but involve issues around documentation and other forms of service access. A more realistic and comprehensive view of self-reliance as a concept and a global policy focus could thus build much-needed momentum for increased support to refugees in urban areas.

Boel: Even with a more holistic view of self-reliance that goes beyond livelihoods, there is still the problem of self-reliance programming being focused more on benefiting host economies than refugees themselves. This logic is evident in the global frameworks the self-reliance concept rests upon. The Global Compact on Refugees and accompanying Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework were presented *"with the objective to ease pressures on the host countries involved, to enhance refugee self-reliance, to expand access to third-country solutions and to support conditions in country of origin for return in safety and dignity"*.[26] Simultaneously, the compact emphasizes that local integration as a solution for refugees

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22. Refugee Self Reliance Initiative, Global Refugee Youth Network and Refugee Led Research Hub (2021), "Refugee self-reliance and the global compact on refugees: unpacking barriers and opportunities for success", available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b96ee1f36099b138a86b3d9/t/61b3cf36ddf93f371e6a5b15/1639173943595/SRCivilSocietyReport_Dec21.pdf.

23. Slaughter, A (2020), "Fostering refugee self-reliance: a case study of an agency's approach in Nairobi", *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol 33, No 1, pages 107–124; TrickleUp (2019a), "Lessons from TrickleUp and UNHCR: applying a refugee lens to graduation key factors in determining appropriateness", available at https://refugees.trickleup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Applying-a-Refugee-Lens-to-Graduation_Lessons_FINAL.pdf; TrickleUp (2019b), "Case study: adapting graduation for refugees in Ecuador", available at https://refugees.trickleup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Adapting-Graduation-for-Refugees-in-Ecuador_Case-Study_FINAL.pdf.

24. Omata, N (2022), "Rethinking self-reliance and

is *"a sovereign decision"*,[27] that repatriation to the country of origin is the preferred solution, and that development assistance in support of this will be prioritized.[28] In this context, self-reliance cannot be understood as equivalent to, or necessarily in support of, local integration, but rather as a weaker concept that takes its place. Self-reliance becomes an interim solution, executed by humanitarian and development actors to make up for the lack of rights provided by states, and comparable to what Brun and Fábos have termed *"local integration lite"*.[29]

Kellie: The RSRI was created as a pragmatic response to this problem, to help refugee-supporting organizations to focus on improving that interim state that so many refugees find themselves in. With urban refugees in mind, it responds to the either/or realities of the prevailing system. As I noted with colleagues in a paper last year, this system has *"entrenched an overly binary paradigm in which either durable solutions are secured or indefinite aid is provided, without sufficient consideration of the grey areas in between, or of how refugees should survive in the long term while awaiting elusive solutions"*.[30] The Self-Reliance Index (SRI) is one tool to address this gap and is an attempt to apply a holistic lens to refugee support with the goal of helping refugee households to connect to the necessary resources and services to move from basic survival toward genuine self-reliance.[31] The initiative is interested to build more impactful programme responses and sees this work not as an alternative but as a complement to policy efforts to secure more rights and protections for refugees.[32] Self-reliance becomes increasingly difficult when there are consistent barriers both to asserting basic rights (such as the right to work and travel) and in accessing services. This in turn leads to an increased need for services to assist refugees to navigate the numerous barriers in front of them. In this sense, self-reliance can be understood as a temporal concept: a journey towards a better life through more holistic refugee support across various areas.

Boel: These efforts to focus on pragmatic solutions for refugees are admirable, but the question remains how far such responses can move towards genuine self-reliance within the current policy framework. The urban refugee policy from 2009 states that UNHCR will support urban refugees to become self-reliant *"to the extent possible, in respect of national laws"*.[33] In practice, national laws very often prevent this and, as a result, refugees are included in labour markets under different and less favourable conditions than nationals.[34] The phenomenon of social exclusion formed through inclusion on unequal terms has been named *"adverse incorporation"*[35] and is common among migrant and refugee workers.[36] As such, there is an inherent risk of exclusion within self-reliance support for urban refugees. Support providers are then free to argue that partial self-reliance support is all they can offer within the state's legal framework for refugee support.

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27. United Nations (2018), "Global compact on refugees", available at https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Global%20compact%20on%20refugees%20EN.pdf, page 34.

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30. Leeson, K, A Slaughter and D Buscher (2023), "Measuring and facilitating self-reliance", *Forced Migration Review* Vol 71, pages 59–62.

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32. Leeson, K, A Slaughter and D Buscher (2023), "Measuring and facilitating self-reliance", *Forced Migration* Review Vol

Kellie: A more holistic understanding of what self-reliance is can help address the issue of partial support. Importantly, self-reliance within the RSRI model is understood as not simply having one's basic needs met, but having resources that sustainably meet these needs so that refugee households can weather the inevitable shocks that will face them, understanding that given the complexity of refugee situations, the road to self-reliance will likely not be linear. The Self-Reliance Index (SRI) provides service providers the information needed to identify what clients need, and where gaps exist to make connections, and encourages critical referrals to help refugee households to navigate complicated systems. For example, someone might be unable to work due to a health issue, which means their self-reliance would be improved by an intervention focused on healthcare. A holistic self-reliance approach can identify these challenges and address them, for example through the provision of basic medicines, to help get families on their feet and more involved with their communities.[37] That said, the SRI is just a tool. The work is to use the information it provides to address the needs, barriers and opportunities it unearths for self-reliance and to adjust programmes if they are missing the mark, while also advocating for changes to the systemic barriers that are highlighted through the SRI. In some countries, programmes focused on access to mental health have helped people move closer to self-reliance. In others, a focus on access to housing has been shown to be useful.

Boel: A holistic approach is helpful, but the real focus should be on refugee wellbeing rather than self-reliance, since the latter still implies an economic focus that begins and ends with market inclusion. Viewing this form of market inclusion as a sustainable solution places responsibility on refugees for their own wellbeing. It requires them to become subjects in the neoliberal economy and look after themselves, despite the many disadvantages facing them.[38] While there has been an important emphasis on recognizing the agency, skills and contributions of refugees as economic actors,[39] in practice refugees are often encouraged by donors and NGOs to pursue and support themselves through entrepreneurship in very challenging environments.[40] Additionally, for women, there is a risk of workloads increasing significantly, as displacement can increase the need and expectation on women to participate in paid labour without necessarily reducing the amount of unpaid housework.[41] True economic inclusion is more complex than it is made out to be in livelihoods and self-reliance-focused support for refugees. These kinds of assistance allow governments to support self-reliance – and be internationally hailed for doing so – without necessarily granting refugees inclusive rights as residents. In practice, the focus of some humanitarian and development agencies remains on providing livelihood support and economic inclusion, without considering the particular vulnerabilities of refugee men and women, caused by their lack of rights.

71, pages 59–62, page 61.

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Kellie: A self-reliance approach is not an alternative to ensuring refugee rights, such as the right to freedom of movement, the right to work and the right to access healthcare. As noted by UNHCR's High Commissioner Ogata, *"there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems"*.[42] Refugee self-reliance programming is not a panacea,[43] but it can help reframe refugee support away from emergency support and towards a focus on refugee agency and stability. However, for refugees to be truly self-reliant they must be able to access the full spectrum of their rights. This is not something that can be effected by the humanitarian community; it must be provided by states. Without rights, the concept of self-reliance risks becoming a bleak replacement for treatment as equal residents in towns and cities alongside host populations, rather than a helpful step towards it.

Boel: Agreed. When governments do not grant them full rights, refugees become secondary citizens and self-reliance becomes an interim solution in the place of full social and economic participation. Local integration was once termed *"the forgotten solution"*,[44] which prompted Fielden to describe it as *"not a forgotten solution, but an undocumented one"*[45] and Hovil to add, *"not so much forgotten as evaded"*,[46] given that host governments often actively work against local integration.

Kellie: Providing opportunities for self-reliance can be a way to ameliorate the very real challenges facing refugees right now in securing more stability for themselves and their households. Self-reliance efforts do not replace refugee rights but should be in concert with continued efforts to expand refugee rights and protections. For refugees to truly be self-reliant, governments must ensure comprehensive refugee rights, but if we wait around for this to happen, we will be waiting a very long time while doing a disservice to refugees and their futures.

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