REFUGEE SELF·RELIANCE INITIATIVE

SELF-RELIANCE EVIDENCE REVIEW

12 Recommendations To Improve Self-Reliance Programming

Introduction

This brief presents tangible takeaways and guidance for designing and implementing programs to improve refugee self-reliance.

The findings and recommendations are drawn from the Self-Reliance Evidence Review, a collaboration between the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and RefugePoint, which aimed to build a cohesive evidence base of what works to support refugees' self-reliance outcomes.

- The project used Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) methodology to source and map the existing literature. Learn more in the Methodology Brief.
- The Defining Self-Reliance Brief presents findings on how the literature included in the Review defines, understands, and operationalizes the concept of refugee self-reliance in programming and policy.
- The Programming for Self-Reliance: Components and Approaches Brief presents various types of existing self-reliance programs, as well as evidence of what works best to enable and support self-reliance at the individual, household, community, and systems levels.
- The Programming for Self-Reliance: Contexts and Populations Brief presents findings from the literature on the contextualization and scalability of refugee self-reliance programs across geographies and populations.
- The project identifies Gaps in the Self-Reliance Evidence Base in the final brief, calling on donors and funders, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to uplift refugee-led research and prioritize the development of a robust and accessible evidence base on what works to promote refugee self-reliance.

Drawing on all five Self-Reliance Evidence Review briefs, this document presents key findings alongside 12 recommendations for improving self-reliance programs. The recommendations are grouped into five topics:

A) Holistic Framing of Refugee Self-Reliance

B) Systems-Level Interventions

C) Multi-Stakeholder Coordination

D) Context-Responsive Programming

E) Population-Responsive Programming

A) Holistic Framing of Refugee Self-Reliance

KEY FINDINGS

- Definitions and practices related to refugee self-reliance have evolved from a sole focus on the economic dimensions of self-reliance (e.g., livelihoods, self- and/or wage employment) to incorporate other needs and dimensions (social, legal, political, etc.).

- Effective programs include a combination of economic, social, and legal components to advance self-reliance outcomes.
    - Economic: Expand beyond livelihoods support and recognize consumption support and financial inclusion as essential elements of economic recovery
    - Social: Include activities that promote social capital/empowerment, social cohesion, and social protection
    - Legal: Strengthen legal assistance for refugees and the overall legal and policy environment via strategic advocacy efforts

- The Graduation Approach is a promising programmatic model that employs a blend of socio-economic interventions, including consumption support, training, and mentoring, to foster sustainable agency among households living in extreme poverty. More evidence is needed to understand how it fosters social, economic, and legal inclusion specifically for refugee populations, as well as its replicability and scalability with groups who are not living in extreme poverty.

Photo: Chris Jensen | RefugePoint

RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Programs should adopt a holistic definition of self-reliance, promoting social, legal, and economic inclusion. The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative defines self-reliance as “the social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a community to meet its needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity” (UNHCR).

02

Implementing agencies should focus on responding to the multidimensional needs of refugees by adapting program design, operation, and evaluation to align with a holistic approach to self-reliance.

Photo: Ben Littlejohn | RefugePoint

B) Systems-Level Interventions

KEY FINDINGS

- Self-reliance is a system-based concept. To achieve self-reliance, one must be able to access a variety of societal services and resources that support and enable one to meet one's basic needs (e.g., market and trade systems, health systems, education systems, community-based psychosocial support systems, etc.). Thus, the policy environment matters, as it can present structural barriers or opportunities to restrict or enable self-reliance.

- Systems-level approaches help identify actors with the influence to impact policy, economic development, and social inclusion for refugees.

- The self-reliance potential of a given area is important and can be assessed by systematically mapping the availability of resources and opportunities for both displaced and host communities.

- It is important to balance refugees' preferences with data from market systems analysis when designing interventions.

- Self-reliance programs have increasingly adopted advocacy components such as promoting less restrictive policy frameworks and supporting refugees' rights within local and national systems. These components include:
    - Social Inclusion: Access to healthcare and social services
    - Economic Inclusion: Access to employment, financial products and services, and all levels of education
    - Legal Inclusion: Access to legal protection

RECOMMENDATIONS

03

Practitioners should leverage program data and evidence to advocate for policies that create a social, economic, and legal environment that enables refugee self-reliance.

04

Programs should consider area-based approaches, mapping resources and opportunities for both refugees and host community members across sectors to develop refugee-hosting areas more broadly.

05

International organizations should promote local systems-based programming, i.e., by building referral networks, integrating programs into existing government and community-based networks, and considering the sustainability of funding, resources, and services in the design and exit strategy.

C) Multi-Stakeholder Coordination

KEY FINDINGS

- Achieving self-reliance in a given context depends on the coordination of multiple stakeholders, including affected communities and populations, humanitarian actors, the private sector, local authorities, civil society, and development actors.

- The evidence base is limited in terms of documenting the availability and effectiveness of community-based and/or refugee-led self-reliance programming and pathways.

- Robust program and impact evaluations of self-reliance components provide evidence for program sustainability and effectiveness over time and can reveal critical gaps in terms of multi-stakeholder coordination and referral systems.

- Local community-based and refugee-led program implementation and evaluation have a vital role to play in building the evidence base of sustainable, scalable, and culturally responsive interventions

Photo: Diana Karua | RefugePoint

RECOMMENDATIONS

06

Organizations should center refugee leadership and perspectives across all stages of self-reliance program planning, implementation, and evaluation, and promote Community-Based Organization (CBO) and Refugee-Led Organization (RLO) access to self-reliance funding opportunities.

07

Programs should prioritize multi-stakeholder engagement within a local context and build formal linkages and referral systems with public and private sector entities, including businesses, government agencies, healthcare institutions, social protection systems, and schools and universities.

08

Implementing organizations should link self-reliance programming to localization efforts to ensure greater accountability, sustainability, and opportunities to scale within specific contexts.

D) Context-Responsive Programming

KEY FINDINGS

- Populations in different displacement contexts have both common and specific self-reliance needs depending on a range of intersectional factors. This requires that self-reliance programming be both scalable and tailored to ensure effectiveness and reach.

- Programming considerations by context:
  - Camp Settings: Often located in more resource-scarce areas, programming approaches that promote economic development and social cohesion among displaced populations and their host communities are crucial.
  - Rural Settings: Effective programming diversifies livelihoods opportunities beyond agriculture, investing in value chain development and facilitating access to social and financial services.
  - Urban Settings: Providing legal assistance to support refugees' access to services and their right to work is vital, as is advocating for programs that promote wage employment opportunities in urban markets and prioritizing interventions that enhance refugees' capacity to navigate complex city systems.

- Nascent literature exists on the connections between self-reliance and climate risks and resilience, though such evidence could inform improved self-reliance program approaches to address the needs of refugees fleeing from or to climate-vulnerable areas.

Photo: Ben Littlejohn | RefugePoint

RECOMMENDATIONS

09

Organizations with programs in multiple contexts should utilize publicly accessible, comprehensive measurement tools, such as the Self-Reliance Index (SRI), to compare the effectiveness of program approaches, track their impact on self-reliance outcomes reliably over time, and tailor services and referral systems accordingly.

10

Programs should dedicate resources to conduct thorough market systems assessments and climate risk planning, consider the specificities of enabling policies in the given context, and support refugees in navigating and accessing complex economic and social systems.

Photo: Chris Jensen | RefugePoint

E) Population-Responsive Programming

KEY FINDINGS

- Populations include individuals with diverse social and cultural identities and norms. Both refugee and host communities, individuals, and households may have differential access to rights, including basic needs such as housing, livelihoods, and education, depending on the socio-economic and political context.
    - Gender and Sexuality: Local gender roles and norms often shift within households during displacement, impacting differential outcomes for women and LGBTQ+ individuals and highlighting the need for gender-responsive program design.
    - Youth: It is good practice for youth-focused self-reliance programming to provide safe spaces and promote continuity of education, critical skill building, mentorship, and opportunities to build social networks.
    - Refugees With Disabilities: Accommodations for people with disabilities to access and participate in self-reliance programs include offering social work or case management services, ensuring accessible program locations, and ensuring adequate training among educators and practitioners.
    - Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): By studying the self-reliance of IDPs, we can better understand how programs can improve to better support them.

Photo: Diana Karua | RefugePoint

RECOMMENDATIONS

11

Programs should tailor resources and services to meet the diverse needs of different groups in displacement-affected populations and critically reflect on programmatic inclusion and exclusion criteria to understand when social biases are preventing or enabling access.

12

Practitioners should ensure that participation in self-reliance programs is accessible to and impactful for households regardless of individual members' gender and sexuality, age, ability, and IDP/refugee status. Agencies should consider how systemic barriers to access intersect in their local context (urban, rural, or camp).

Photo: Chris Jensen | RefugePoint

Conclusion

Practitioners designing and implementing self-reliance programs can strengthen their approach by considering the evidence-based recommendations presented in this brief. Potential improvements span five main themes:

A) Holistic Framing of Refugee Self-Reliance

B) Systems-Level Interventions

C) Multi-Stakeholder Coordination

D) Context-Responsive Programming

E) Population-Responsive Programming

For further reading, see the Self-Reliance Evidence Review and its five briefs:

- Self-Reliance Evidence Review Methodology →
- Defining Self-Reliance →
- Programming for Self-Reliance: Components and Approaches →
- Programming for Self-Reliance: Contexts and Populations →
- Gaps in the Self-Reliance Evidence Base →

This brief was written by Alli Gillespie (Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative). The findings and recommendations were reviewed by the primary authors of the Self-Reliance Evidence Review, Simar Singh (RefugePoint) and Solenne Delga (Danish Refugee Council).

Photos courtesy of RefugePoint.

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