

# SELF-RELIANCE EVIDENCE REVIEW

SELECTED FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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This study was undertaken jointly by RefugePoint and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), both members of the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI). The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any of these organizations.

**RefugePoint** advances lasting solutions for at-risk refugees and supports the humanitarian community to do the same. RefugePoint was founded in 2005 to identify refugees who fall through the cracks of humanitarian aid. Initially providing life-saving care to HIV+ refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, over time, RefugePoint developed a unique, full-service response model for assisting urban refugees and facilitating their self-reliance. RefugePoint co-launched and co-leads the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative.

The **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** assists refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 40 countries across the globe. DRC was founded in Denmark in 1956 and has since grown to become an international humanitarian organisation with 9,000 employees and 7,500 volunteers. We work in conflict-affected areas, along the displacement routes, and in the countries where refugees settle. The range of our work is everything from relief work to strengthen the opportunity for a brighter future for refugees and IDPs.

The Self-Reliance Evidence Review and related outputs are available at the following link:

<https://www.refugeeselfreliance.org/evidence-review>

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Cover Image: Aisha, a beekeeper in Hama, Syria (january 2020), courtesy of DRC.

Inside: Children in Azraq refugee camp in Jordan (march 2019), courtesy of DRC.

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## WHAT IS THE SELF-RELIANCE EVIDENCE REVIEW?

*The Self-Reliance Evidence Review (SRER)* is a knowledge-mapping and assessment of publicly available research and evidence relating to self-reliance for refugees. RefugePoint and DRC have jointly undertaken a review of over 160 resources on refugee self-reliance published between 2005 and 2021.

The project contributes to the *Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative's (RSRI) Learning Agenda*, which outlines core questions to be answered to create an evidence base for what works best to help refugees achieve self-reliance.

The objectives of the SRER are: (1) to propose a consolidated, easily-accessed mapping of existing knowledge and evidence around refugee self-reliance; (2) to identify programme approaches and models that help foster self-reliance which further facilitate replication and scaling of effective practices; and (3) to highlight outstanding gaps in evidence which could be filled by other measurement and research initiatives.

The SRER outputs - including a 'living' resource library on refugee self-reliance and a series of thematic evidence briefs - will be released in early 2022.

## KEY FINDINGS

### ON THE DEFINITION OF SELF-RELIANCE

**Program and policy documents vary in how they define self-reliance, which hinders a shared understanding of the concept.**

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. The term 'self-reliance' is frequently 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 of programs and policies that aim to promote refugee self-reliance.

**There is a growing acknowledgement that self-reliance is not about complete indepen-**

**dence from all types of support systems.** But there is still discussion over what systems a refugee can rely on and still be considered self-reliant. Policy-oriented definitions mostly explain self-reliance as not being dependent on external assistance. They often do not specify what types of "external assistance" are being referred to, which can be left open to interpretation. These definitions also fall short of shedding light on what types of interventions might promote self-reliance.

**Self-reliance is increasingly understood as being multi-dimensional, yet a significant proportion of the literature still focuses exclusively on the economic dimension of self-reliance.** The definitions of self-reliance have evolved from solely focusing on the economic dimensions of self-reliance (eg. livelihoods, income and employment) to

acknowledge other dimensions of self-reliance (social, legal, political, etc). The most-commonly cited definition of self-reliance is the [2005 UNHCR definition](#) that is bi-dimensional and highlights economic

and social aspects. Yet most programmatic definitions of self-reliance still fall short of describing the multidimensionality of self-reliance and related programming.

## ON PROGRAMMING FOR SELF-RELIANCE

**Program approaches that consider a variety of both social and economic inclusion components are increasingly considered more effective.**

Livelihoods interventions are widely considered to be a central and necessary component of economic inclusion programming in support of refugee self-reliance. However, not all livelihoods interventions for refugees are necessarily conducive to self-reliance. Rather, interventions that are market-based and aim at providing decent, sustainable and diversified livelihoods are considered more effective in supporting refugee self-reliance. Additionally, on their own, livelihoods interventions, or any single-sector intervention, are considered to be insufficient to support most refugees to become self-reliant. In addition to economic inclusion, there is a need for social inclusion programming to achieve better self-reliance outcomes.

**There is increasing recognition that the level of self-reliance that refugees can achieve in a given context is highly dependent on the policy environment and the macroeconomic environment.**

Beyond individual and household-level interventions, self-reliance programming is also related to identifying structural barriers impacting refugees and designing system-level interventions that contribute to the broader development of refugee-hosting areas. Robust self-reliance programming for refugees stems from (1) systematic assessments of their economic, social and other needs and analyses that account for the multiple and complex interdependencies between them; (2) program approaches that are informed by such assessments in the design and sequencing of specific program components (such as livelihoods interventions that are market-based); and (3) system-level interventions

that affect the policy environment and the macroeconomic environment in which refugees live.

**Self-reliance programming depends upon the capacity and responsibility of multiple stakeholders, including humanitarian actors but also local authorities, the private sector, civil society and development actors.**

The literature increasingly emphasizes the essential role that local authorities have both at the national and the sub-national level to influence and create a more inclusive and enabling policy environment (especially in terms of the right to work and freedom of movement) that can support refugees to become self-reliant. Similarly, while refugee response has long been seen as a responsibility of humanitarian actors, there is also an increased recognition of the role that development actors can play in fostering the local economic development of refugee-hosting areas, for example by ensuring that foreign aid flows to these regions and by working with local authorities to ensure that national development plans take the needs of these areas into account. Finally, especially in recent years, there is increased emphasis in the literature of the ways in which the private sector and civil society can each support refugee self-reliance, and the need to engage and partner with them in refugee self-reliance programming.

**Self-reliance doesn't look the same in any two contexts or for any two people. As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for self-reliance programming.**

Self-reliance programs are implemented in a vast array of displacement, socio-economic and political contexts, each of which influences how self-reliance programs should be designed and what works. As a result, program



components need to be systematically adapted and tailored to specific contexts, populations and their circumstances. Yet, there is relatively little research about self-reliance programming that is specifically segmented by differences in context and population. This makes it challenging to draw broader conclusions about effective program models that can be applied to contexts that share similar characteristics or populations with specific needs.

**There is an existing tension between the broad extent of needs for self-reliance programming and the relatively limited reach of existing self-reliance programming efforts.** Given the massive need for self-reliance programming, widely

scalable programming is crucial. At the same time, it is important to focus on programming practices that have high success rates as defined by the proportion of the target groups that become more self-reliant. Yet, the literature shows that there is a fundamental difference between determining what works for large groups and what works for specific target groups. There is still limited evidence about successful program models for refugee self-reliance programming at large scale. Tailored approaches, that account for the high heterogeneity in the skills, capacities and aspirations of refugee populations, are more likely to have high success rates but are also by nature limited in scale.

## ON THE MEASUREMENT OF SELF-RELIANCE

**Enhancing self-reliance has become an increasingly prominent goal in refugee response, yet efforts to monitor and track progress have lagged behind.** While agencies have been conducting self-reliance programming for many years, systematic efforts to rigorously measure the impact of these interventions are few and far between. Much of the literature on self-reliance only makes a passing reference to measurement, usually highlighting the need to create robust measures and acknowledging the complexity of doing so. However, in the last few years there have been some promising attempts to bridge this measurement gap, notably through the Self-Reliance Index, developed by the Refugee Self-reliance Initiative and through research undertaken by the Refugee Economies program at the University of Oxford.

**Two separate but related aspects of self-reliance are typically assessed: (1) the level of self-reliance of an individual or a household, and (2) conditions that enable or impede the achievement of self-reliance within a specific location.** These two aspects respond to linked goals; the former relates to evaluating the effectiveness of a self-reliance intervention or program and the latter relates to assessing how conducive the conditions within a specific location are to enabling self-reliance. In several research papers, both aspects were also considered concurrently.

**There is a broad disconnect between what we aim to measure and what is actually being measured.**

*Proxy vs. direct measures:* The vast majority of

self-reliance programs in the resources reviewed do not use tools or conceptual frameworks that have been specifically developed to measure or evaluate refugee self-reliance. Instead, most used project-specific indicators that were selected as proxies for self-reliance, such as levels of income, number of job placements, or access to basic services. While these measure the results of individual program interventions, they provide an incomplete picture of the self-reliance standing of a refugee, which is dependent on numerous interdependent factors. More recently, there are promising efforts to create direct, multidimensional measures for self-reliance, such as the Self-Reliance Index.

**Levels of intervention vs. units of analysis:** While there is general agreement in the literature that the household is the most appropriate unit for analysis when measuring self-reliance, indicators used to measure self-reliance are typically at the individual level. This is because most self-reliance programs typically rely only on project-specific indicators for evaluation, which usually only reflect the specific in-

terventions carried out by the implementing agency, many of which are targeted at individuals—such as, education programs, skill-development programs or support for income generating activities. However, when assessing self-reliance, it is important to look beyond the individual and also measure the impact on the wider household.

**Short-term program cycles vs. longer-term outcomes:** Self-reliance is typically measured in line with 6 or 12 month humanitarian program cycles, usually at the baseline and/or endline. However, these short program cycles are not well aligned with the longer timeframes that are typically needed to observe changes in self-reliance outcomes and may not adequately track the progression of refugees towards self-reliance. In addition, since self-reliance is understood as transitioning off dependence on aid, it is important to measure the self-reliance status of a household extending past the end of a project cycle to understand the sustainability of results. However, there are few systematic efforts to do so.

## ON THE FINANCING OF SELF-RELIANCE

**Traditional humanitarian funding streams are not well-suited for self-reliance programming.** The literature increasingly questions whether self-reliance programs can be successfully implemented within the typical short-term funding cycles of humanitarian programs. Most humanitarian funding is designed to support relatively short (6-12 month) program cycles and sector-specific interventions. This approach to funding is misaligned with the multi-year, multi-sector, integrated approaches to self-reliance programming that are considered to be more effective.

**Many resources assume self-reliance programming has better value-for-money than other types of humanitarian programming, but there is little research on how to calculate the value-for-money of self-reliance.** Overall, there is

relatively little specific information about the costs of self-reliance programming. A notable exception is a subset of documents that focus on the Graduation Approach, which is the single most-commonly cited approach of self-reliance programming. Yet, even for the Graduation Approach, there is relatively little evidence about the value-for-money in displacement contexts specifically. When value-for-money of self-reliance programs is discussed, it is usually conceptualized in terms of cost-efficiency, and implicitly compared to other types of humanitarian programs for refugees such as care and maintenance programs. There are few critical reflections about the disconnect between cost-efficiency, which is a short-term measure, and the value-for-money of self-reliance programs, which has an inherent long-term logic.

## ON RESEARCH GAPS ABOUT SELF-RELIANCE

**The evidence review identified few attempts to incorporate diverse perspectives when defining or discussing self-reliance.** Less than a quarter of the resources reviewed meaningfully included refugee voices and perspectives, beyond including survey data. Furthermore, the resources on self-reliance originate from a small number of primarily European or North American organizations, with 90% of resources being published by only 15 organizations. This lack of diversity in perspectives may impact how we understand and define self-reliance.

**Few connections were made in the literature between self-reliance and important topics such as climate change and localization.** In relation to self-reliance, the discussion on climate change is usually limited to identifying environmental changes as shocks that could impede refugees from achieving self-reliance. For localization, recommendations are made in the literature for international organizations to coordinate with and transition responsibility to local/national institutions when implementing self-reliance programs, but few details were provided on best practices and they do not address potential tensions between the implementation of self-reliance interventions and local/national government interests.

**Refugee self-reliance is often discussed in rela-**

**tion to durable solutions, but there is little examination of how it specifically contributes to each of the three pathways.** When refugee self-reliance is discussed in relation to durable solutions, there are differing opinions as to whether self-reliance should be seen as a preparatory step toward a durable solution or as a substitute when durable solutions are not feasible. Yet, while self-reliance is discussed in relation to durable solutions as a whole, there is relatively less attention dedicated to how it relates to each individual durable solution pathway. In particular, there is surprisingly little discussion in the literature on how self-reliance is linked to voluntary return and third-country resettlement.

**The evidence review did not identify much specific research on how self-reliance can be successful for diverse population groups, including, but not limited to, IDPs, women, youth, and people with disabilities.** There are, for example, few resources comparing self-reliance for refugees to self-reliance for IDPs. Yet, comparing self-reliance for refugees and IDPs can help clarify which barriers to self-reliance are related to displacement itself, and which are related more specifically to the legal framework related to cross-border asylum. There is also limited evidence on best practices of gendered or age-related self-reliance programming.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

**All stakeholders** should include refugee perspectives when designing, implementing, assessing and discussing self-reliance programs and policies.

**Donors** should prioritize funding research that systematically collects refugee perspectives on self-reliance, so that these can 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.

**Implementing agencies** should consider all dimensions of self-reliance and the different levels at which

change can be effected when designing programs, policies and measurement strategies, including:

- Considering the complementary objectives of (1) how to bridge the gap in self-reliance between refugee populations and local populations, and (2) how to contribute to increase the potential for self-reliance for all populations in a given refugee-hosting area.
- Using systems approaches to ensure that self-reliance programming for refugees is market-based and that design of interventions is cognizant of broader systemic and structural issues in the market environment.
- Systematically designing self-reliance programs through strategic partnerships and in coordination with local authorities, the private sector, civil society, and development actors.
- Designing self-reliance programs that take AGD-inclusive approaches and develop new program models that are tailored and adapted to the needs of populations with specific age, gender and diversity characteristics.

**Donors** should create flexible, cross-sector and multi-year funding tools to support the types of programs that can foster and sustain refugee self-reliance.

**Development actors and hosts governments** should support local economic development in support of refugee self-reliance by directing adequate resources to refugee-hosting areas.

## EVIDENCE AND LEARNING

**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, track progress and promote collaboration between implementing agencies

Discussions of refugee self-reliance in programming or policy should as a start include an explicit definition of self-reliance as well as systematically take into account (1) the multidimensional nature of self-reliance; (2) the quality standards that are inherent to self-reliance programming; and (3) the various local support systems that enable self-reliance.

**All stakeholders** should publicly share the knowledge and learning gained from research studies, evaluations and assessments to support building the evidence-base for effective practices that support refugee self-reliance.

**Host governments** should share experiences and lessons learned for effectively developing inclusive policy frameworks for refugees with other governments that currently have more restrictive policy and legal frameworks.

**Donors** should support the generation of robust evidence on what works to help refugees become and stay self-reliant, including by funding self-reliance monitoring efforts beyond the end of a program intervention, and filling research gaps including cross-country comparisons and research on the broader impact of increased self-reliance efforts on refugees and host communities.

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