



Local responses to displacement do not sit in isolation from one another: instead, they are shaped by diverse overlapping processes and intersecting contexts of protracted displacement.ⁱ This significantly challenges a view of local responses as being contained within just one municipality, neighbourhood or camp. Rather, an appreciation of how local responses in diverse spaces develop in relation to one another, enables a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the dynamics and processes that shape local responses to displacement.ⁱⁱ

Equally, there is a tendency to view hosts as citizens that provide support to refugees. However, “shifting the gaze” towards a more relational approachⁱⁱⁱ recognises the significant role that refugees themselves play as providers of support and assistance, including through processes that can be conceptualised as ‘refugee-refugee humanitarianism’.^{iv} In contexts of protracted displacement, newly arrived refugees will be hosted by established refugee communities displaced from ongoing protracted conflict, as is the case of people arriving from Syria and being hosted by Palestinian refugees in Baddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon. ‘Refugees’ and ‘hosts’ are not always distinct categories of people; refugees may previously have been hosts; and citizens in host countries may have past experiences of both displacement *and* of hosting.^v These shared histories of displacement and hosting inform local responses in ways that are under appreciated. Accounting for these relational processes, including through a recognition of ‘refugee-refugee relationality’^{vi}, ‘overlapping displacement’^{vii} and intersecting structural barriers, is vital. This Research Brief offers recommendations to this effect.

Recommendations

Humanitarian engagements with local communities must be **attentive to the pre-existing historical, social, political, and personal networks and connections that exist** within and between neighbourhoods and camps that are hosting refugees.

Humanitarian policy and practice must **acknowledge the roles that refugees themselves play as hosts to other refugees**, especially in contexts of protracted displacement. Failure to do so means that interventions will continue to side-line and undermine the significant roles played by members of established refugee communities.

Local community **motivations for supporting refugees are shaped by past histories of displacement**. These are often overlooked by top-down, short-term or presentist approaches to humanitarian programming.

A focus on ‘refugee-host’ communities challenges assumptions that only active citizens supply assistance to passive refugees – instead **both local communities and refugee communities must be seen as equal and overlapping constituents of local communities** that offer aid, solidarity, and support in contexts of displacement.

Efforts to localise aid that shift responsibility to local actors must be sustainable and this includes engaging with, rather than undermining, existing responses. This can be achieved through a careful recognition of the roles played by all members of local communities, including refugees, hosts and ‘refugee-hosts’.

Engaging with local communities must account for the structural barriers that differently affect members of the same local community. Too often, interventions that target specific categories of people, including refugees of specific nationalities, may strengthen structural barriers and undermine shared efforts and solidarity that exist within diverse local communities. A place-based, rather than nationality-based approach presents opportunities for more equitable modes of response.

A relational approach allows interventions **to take account of the shared and overlapping needs and rights of both refugees and hosts, moving beyond a view that sees these as distinct categories with wholly different needs**.

Relational Approaches

Relational approaches entail identifying and understanding the relationships that exist between different people, places, spaces and histories where people are both being hosted and are hosting other people. Rather than seeing specific towns, cities and camps in isolation, a relational approach recognises how these places simultaneously embrace, embody and are *constituted* by one another through shared histories and experiences of both displacement and hosting.^{viii}

A relational approach is invaluable to humanitarian research and practice: it promotes multi-perspectival answers to complex problems, and it allows us to grasp the complex relations that exist between different groups of people. Amongst other things, relational approaches provide an alternative perspective to the assumption that encounters between refugees and hosts will inevitably be defined by conflict. Instead, mutual modes of support and solidarity that exist between refugees and hosts are recognised, including those taking place through personal, familial, social, and historical networks across different spaces.

Understanding Relationality

As Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh has observed in Baddawi refugee camp, north Lebanon:

“Exploring ‘echoes’ and ‘overlaps’ requires us to acknowledge that ‘the camp’ both embraces and embodies other camps, becoming more-than-a-camp and also more than a-camp-within-the-camp. This is reflected not only through the arrival and enduring presence of Syria’s Yarmouk camp within Baddawi camp and its cemetery, but also through the ‘re-emergence’ of Tel el-Zaatar, which was destroyed in the Lebanese Civil War, within Baddawi itself: Tel el-Zaatar was physically erased in the late-1970s, and yet continues to exist, physically as well as metaphorically, in Baddawi camp.”^{ix}

Likewise, in Irbid camp in Jordan, connections arose between other sites, such as similarities between existing physical structures, as well as interconnected familial and personal histories. This was also reflected in the encounters that emerged between archival photographs and workshop participants in Jarash:

As the Syrian, Palestinian, Iraqi and Jordanian participants on the outskirts of Jarash held and critically examined the images, a Jordanian medical student noted the remarkable level of detail captured in the photograph from Irbid camp, before turning to explore the depths of a second untitled image.

‘This could be here... Is it here?’^{ix}

These examples demonstrate the complex relationships that exists between different displacement-affected localities. These are defined by personal, familial, emotional, economic, and political ties that make it difficult to view the responses taking place in such localities in isolation.



Touching a wall in Irbid camp, Jordan, a wall which resembles the original walls of Baddawi camp, Lebanon
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What is overlapping displacement?

“While a great deal of academic and policy attention has been given to [protracted displacement and urban displacement], very little research has been conducted into the nature and implications of ‘overlapping’ displacements, including with regard to local communities. I use this term to refer to two forms of ‘overlap’.

Firstly, refugees and IDPs have often both personally and collectively experienced secondary and tertiary displacement. This is the case of those Sahrawi and Palestinian refugees who left their refugee camp homes in Algeria and Lebanon to study or work in Libya before being displaced by the outbreak of conflict there in 2011, and of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees who had originally sought safety in Syria only to be displaced once more by the conflict there.

Secondly, refugees are increasingly experiencing overlapping displacement in the sense that they often physically share spaces with other displaced people. For example, Turkey hosts refugees from over 35 countries of origin, Lebanon from 17 countries, Kenya 16, Jordan 14, Chad 12 and both Ethiopia and Pakistan 11. Given the protracted nature of displacement, over time these refugee groups often become members of communities which subsequently welcome and offer protection and support to other groups of displaced people.”^x

Responding to change over time:

Typically, it is assumed that refugees will be most vulnerable immediately after displacement, and that this vulnerability will decrease over time. A relational approach instead recognises the existence of structural barriers at multiple levels, and how these intersect with one another over time and in specific places. For example, xenophobia, racism, and political, social, and economic inequalities pervade contexts of protracted displacement and shape how vulnerability is experienced in a non-linear way.

The Refugee Hosts research project has shown that despite the existence of aid programmes and humanitarian assistance, people’s vulnerabilities often increase over time and in relation to specific crises that affect local communities in different ways. For example, Lebanon has been home to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees since the 1950s, large numbers of whom experienced mass displacement during the Lebanese civil war. Refugees arriving from Syria since 2011 were subsequently hosted in towns, cities and camps that have long been responding to both internal and international processes of protracted displacement in Lebanon. The Covid-19 pandemic which reached Lebanon in March 2020, as well as the catastrophic Beirut port explosion in August 2020, a crippling economic crisis, and the persistence of xenophobic responses^{xi} by politicians and states have all

compounded underlying structural vulnerabilities which frame the lives of residents in different ways.^{xii} As a result, the vulnerabilities of displaced communities and host communities have increased over time. Rather than seeing displacement as the cause of vulnerability, to be addressed solely by focussing assistance on newly arrived refugees, a relational approach recognises how these structural factors and crises intersect with one another and must be addressed holistically.^{xiii}



*Anti-Syrian graffiti in Lebanon, which has been sprayed over and ‘corrected’ in protest against racism and xenophobia © E. Fiddian-Qasbiyeh
Read a reflection on this photo on [Refugee Hosts](#)*

This also involves accounting for and supplementing the work that refugees themselves do to solve the challenges they face. The compounding nature of these crises does not mean that refugees wait for external assistance.

Despite these barriers, refugees will initiate activities to address shared and emerging challenges, such as in Baddawi refugee camp where community groups led by refugees organised the preparation of *iftar* food baskets for residents to break their fast during the holy month of Ramadan.^{xiv} Refugee-led community groups also produced information on Covid-19, and ‘borrowed’ ambulances to support the whole community after medical resources and infrastructure were relocated to Beirut to address the needs of people affected by the port explosion.^{xv} The Refugee Hosts research project highlights how communities draw on histories of mutual aid and of responding to different structural issues using and adapting existing networks. Such examples highlight how refugee-host communities work to address the needs and vulnerabilities of all residents that reside in localities, seeking to address structural inequalities in a mutually supportive and non-hierarchical way.

“The disease is not yet here. Alongside our heavy hearts, we have what will be: flour, beads of yeast, whole and crushed lentils, potatoes, their red soil to nurture escaping blessings in dryness.”

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh
With a Third Eye, I see the Catastrophe

Relational approaches to humanitarianism

Humanitarian responses tend to triage and categorise who is eligible for support in certain contexts and in response to certain crises. Humanitarian labels include ‘refugees’ on the one hand, and ‘hosts’ on the other. These are used as though they are clearly separate, clearly defined groups of people with different needs. However, as our research highlights, refugees have often acted as hosts in the past and may act as hosts today. For instance, more than a third of our Syrian interlocutors in the Hamra neighbourhood of Beirut had hosted internally displaced people before they left Syria in search of refuge in Lebanon. In turn, citizens in host countries may have past experiences both of displacement *and* of hosting: this was the case amongst over a third of our Lebanese interlocutors in Beirut, whose narratives outlined their experiences both of being internally displaced and of hosting other people during the Lebanese Civil War. Hosts and refugees often share experiences both of displacement and of hosting, in addition to sharing spaces and resources.

However, humanitarian programmes often overlook this, only aiding people identified as refugees, or as hosts, failing to acknowledge the multiple roles people can play and the shared needs and challenges they face in their localities.^{xvi} Instead, what is needed are policies and interventions which are attentive to the shared processes that give rise to the particular needs and rights of the diverse members of local communities. Whilst needs will not be uniform within any one locality, a relational approach allows humanitarian support to be offered in a way that is mutually beneficial to communities responding to displacement and prevents hierarchies being produced between those deemed eligible and ineligible for support.

Indeed, our research highlights how tensions arise in local communities because of UN and NGO responses that make distinctions and prioritise one group over another. For example, the provision of food vouchers to Syrians in urban refugee camps by the World Food Programme meant that other refugees living in the same space were side-lined, such as Palestinians, Iraqis and Kurds.^{xvii} The initiative also disrupted the local camp economy, since the vouchers could only be spent outside of the camp, rather than inside of it. Despite having shared needs as residents of an urban camp, a hierarchy emerged between different groups that created tensions between inhabitants. Recognising that such tensions are not inevitable, including by adopting a relational approach, offers a way for humanitarian support to address rather than compound structural inequalities, including those created by different policies and programmes. This, in turn, will lead to more equitable and sustainable interventions for people affected by, and responding to, displacement.



*Members of the Baddawi Camp Cultural Club prepare food baskets for camp residents in response to Covid-19.
© M. M. Qasmiyeh*

Background

This Research Brief is based on the AHRC-ESRC funded *Refugee Hosts* project, which investigated local community responses to and experiences of displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Visit www.refugeehosts.org

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Refugee Hosts Recommendations for Research and Practice Series

- #1: [Understanding Local Responses to Displacement](#)
- #2: [Engaging with Histories and Narratives of Displacement](#)
- #3: [Refugee-Host Relationality](#)
- #4: [Local Faith Community Responses to Displacement](#)
- #5: [Critical Approaches to Voice and Writing in Displacement](#)

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