

Local communities play key roles in responding to displacement. They are often the first providers of assistance to refugees, offering hospitality, care and different forms of protection.ⁱ Local responses are often shaped by long histories of displacement, including in urban refugee camps, towns and cities. Local responses also change over time, including as a result of changing international and national politics, policies and programmes. These changes may raise opportunities for local responses to be supported and consolidated, but may also create and reproduce different types of tensions between different people, groups and institutions. Despite all this, humanitarian engagement with local communities has often been limited, favouring vertical and less integrated responses,ⁱⁱ notwithstanding the ‘Localisation of Aid’ agenda.ⁱⁱⁱ This Research Brief, based on the Refugee Hosts project’s research in nine neighbourhoods in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, calls for a more transformational and equitable commitment to engagement with local communities responding to displacement. Local communities should be seen as responders in their own right, with capacities, histories and knowledge that needs to be recognised by humanitarian practitioners.

Recommendations

To identify effective, appropriate, efficient, and respectful strategies for humanitarian engagement, humanitarian workers need to be equipped to **understand the role of history, locality, religion, and time in shaping the experience of hosting and refuge** in any given setting.

Those working in humanitarian coordination need to develop **stronger skills in mapping local resources and developing equitable forms of dialogue with diverse community actors**; the role must no longer be principally focused on channelling resource flows and capacities from international to national or municipal actors.

Given the importance of local dynamics in shaping peoples’ needs and responses, humanitarian coordination and delivery cannot be effectively managed from capital cities or other remote coordination centres; appropriate **humanitarian coordination capacity needs to be located proximally to major locations of refugee displacement and hosting**.

This includes recognising refugee communities as members of local communities which are responding to displacement too. **Effective engagement with local communities must not be limited to the assumption that response is initiated or led by citizens alone**, as responses are potentially developed and implemented by all individuals residing in neighbourhoods and communities, including refugees.

History matters

Local responses are animated by diverse histories of migration, kinship and previous processes of displacement and hosting.^{iv} The intergenerational context of local responses, especially in protracted displacement situations, becomes important in understanding movement, expectations of welcome, hosting and being hosted. People’s particular histories, and the histories of particular spaces, play a significant role in shaping local responses. Taking history seriously, including by engaging with local knowledges, helps develop and sustain meaningful and equitable engagement between members of communities and humanitarian practitioners.



Viewing archival photographs during a writing workshop in Zarqaa, Jordan
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Locality matters

Spaces, environments, and neighbourhoods shape local responses in ways that are often overlooked. These physical aspects of locality and place contribute to dynamics of inclusion or exclusion.^v Place creates a distinctive setting for the experiences of refugees and of hosting. Localities affected by displacement need to be understood not only with reference to their economic dynamics, but also in reference to shifts in social norms and changes in what types of spaces are available, accessible, and usable by different people. Adopting a greater degree of spatial awareness about localities, and their changing dynamics, is important in understanding and engaging with local responses. The locality is where much informal humanitarian action is focused, and humanitarian coordination must not be blind to the arena of the neighbourhood. Developing place-based programmes – rather than nationality-based initiatives, for instance – can ensure that all residents in that neighbourhood are included in initiatives and have equal access to resources and opportunities. This can minimise the likelihood that internationally- and nationally-developed programmes will create tensions between groups of people who are experiencing and responding to displacement in different ways.

Religion matters

Religious sentiments, obligations, principles and commitments around behaviour, reciprocity and hospitality often shape the roles and expectations of both hosts and new arrivals in local contexts.^{vi} Sometimes the consequences of this on local responses are very apparent, animating the delivery of food to neighbours during religious holidays or channelling alms to those in need.^{vii} At other times dynamics related implicitly or explicitly to religion and faith play out between hosts and refugees in a manner that is tacit and unspoken and, whilst impactful, operates outside the awareness of others; what Refugee Hosts PI Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh conceptualises as ‘the poetics of undisclosed care’.^{viii} For example, religious stories or principles guide ethical action and everyday responses, such as providing accommodation for a short period of time to individuals or families. These acts can be overlooked, but their significance on dynamics of local hosting and hospitality are significant. Appreciating the religious landscape of local responses therefore matters, as it significantly shapes local response. Humanitarians need to understand the ways that religion may be relevant to different people in a given local context.



*Dusk in Baddawi camp,
North Lebanon
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Time matters

Over time, local responses shift in different ways: the significance of time depends on specific local contexts, histories, and capacities, as well as the nature and presence of different international and national responses. It is common to initially see evidence of strong welcome and support. However, hosts’ and refugees’ narratives consistently document how local dynamics change. During protracted crises, capacities may be eroded, competition for resources may increase, as may sensitivity to real, apparent or imagined inequities. However, these strains are not inevitable: they are often linked to the impact of international and national policies and interventions or overlapping crises,^{ix} which may produce or introduce new tensions into a community. For example, tensions between different groups of refugees (Syrians, Palestinians, for example) have emerged over time in local contexts because of how international aid, such as the World Food Programme’s voucher programme in Lebanon, has divided people displaced by the same conflict on the basis of their nationality, rather than addressing shared needs and recognising forms of solidarity that often cross national boundaries.^x



*Women walking along a main road in Jordan
© E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh*

Implications for Humanitarian Response

Changing emphasis of humanitarian coordination

The 'Localisation of Aid' agenda encourages a shift from seeing humanitarian action as a question of managing resources flows from international to national communities, to one that is more attuned to the resources and support networks that already exist within localities that are both affected by, and are responding to, displacement. This might include identifying the ways that resources are collected, created and shared through local mosques, local NGOs, and households, as well as the limitations of local forms of response, and how these can be better supported. This approach also promotes a greater degree of sensitivity toward local agendas and dynamics. Humanitarian coordinators must seek to identify what appropriate resources already exist locally, as well as what the residents of a locality understand their needs to be. This can best be done through a commitment to long-term and equitable dialogue, an approach that is not well served by a system generally staffed through successive, short-term assignments.

Addressing structural barriers

"We cannot understand either the vulnerabilities that people face in displacement or the responses they are developing without considering the ways that local experiences and responses are framed by national and international systems, including long-standing structural inequalities and processes of marginalization and exclusion."^{xi}

As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh outlines above, increased attentiveness to local processes and resources must recognise and seek to address the presence of structural barriers and inequalities. Local community responses, including those initiated by established refugee communities, often take place in contexts of overlapping precarity, where structural barriers often prevent people from being able to find and enact solutions to the diverse challenges they are facing. Equitable and sustainable engagement must therefore work with local communities to identify and work to overcome shared challenges and inequalities that arise in contexts of protracted displacement.



Localising engagement

Localisation must mean local, reaching the neighbourhood and street level. Rather than relying exclusively on regional or national coordination hubs that outsource to local NGOs as an avenue to 'localisation', humanitarian practitioners must find ways to localise their engagement more meaningfully with members of communities. Often humanitarian coordination within localities replicates an arm's length way of working, divorced from the routines and everyday lives of those responding to and experiencing displacement.^{xii} Being present within communities encourages humanitarian action to engage with localities, fostering greater understanding of how people conceptualise and respond to displacement and 'hosting', and how they value and distribute different forms of material and immaterial forms of support. This does not simply mean relocating international staff to specific localities. Rather, it is about creating mechanisms that ensure that humanitarian response prioritises what local actors actually need.

Committing to engage with complexity

Local responses need to be viewed "in relation, not in isolation."^{xiii} Local responses are driven by complex factors that can be challenging to identify and understand, including personal and local histories, faith, shared experiences, solidarity and time. These forces are often very local and culturally embedded, but are also connected to larger national, regional, and transnational processes. Rather than seeing these local dynamics as so complex that it is simply easier to disengage, humanitarians must turn complexity on its head. A growing awareness of local responses is an opportunity to address unequal power dynamics between humanitarians and local communities, encouraging practitioners to find more dialogic ways of engaging with local responses. It is also an opportunity to equitably engage with the existing capacities and networks that exist at the local level, understanding how these are not, nor should they be seen as being, disconnected from regional or international response. They are an essential part of the picture. An appreciation of local complexity becomes a route toward deeper, richer engagements with communities, enabling a more sensitive appreciation of local resources and capacities otherwise overlooked by more vertical, less integrated models of humanitarian intervention.

*Jebel el-Baddawi, on the outskirts of Baddawi camp, North Lebanon
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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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- #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](#)

References

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