



Social Assistance and Forced Displacement: A New Solution to an Old Problem?

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ABSTRACT

Social protection is a well-accepted means to tackle poverty. This article focuses on social assistance, one aspect of social protection primarily involving non-contributory transfers, in cash or in-kind. Forcibly displaced people, particularly those displaced across international borders, have typically been excluded from state-provided social assistance. This has begun to change. In addition, informal sources of social assistance—community organizations, neighbours, faith groups, and family networks—are particularly significant for displaced people. A more transformative understanding of social protection should encompass this wider array of sources. Interpreted in this way, social assistance offers a new way of bridging humanitarian and development responses to displacement.

KEYWORDS

refugees; humanitarianism; displacement; social protection

RÉSUMÉ

La protection sociale est un moyen reconnu de lutter contre la pauvreté. Cet article se concentre sur l'assistance sociale, un aspect de la protection sociale qui implique principalement des transferts non-contributifs, en espèces ou en nature. Les personnes en déplacement forcé, particulièrement celles qui sont déplacées au-delà des frontières internationales, ont généralement été exclues de l'assistance sociale fournie par l'État. Cette situation commence à changer. En outre, les sources informelles d'assistance sociale - organisations communautaires, voisinage, groupes confessionnels et réseaux familiaux - sont particulièrement importantes pour les personnes déplacées. Une compréhension plus transformatrice de la protection sociale devrait englober cet éventail de ressources plus large. Interprétée de cette manière, l'assistance sociale offre un nouveau moyen de concilier les réponses humanitaires et de développement en matière de déplacement.

INTRODUCTION

The need to shift responses to displacement from humanitarianism to development has been discussed since at least the 1970s, although there have been few, if any, notable policy successes (Betts, Bloom, et al., 2017). Social protection provides a further way of supporting this transition. Although social

protection is well established in wider development circles, particularly around the nexus with humanitarianism and peace, it has not been widely examined in a displacement context (Kool & Nimeh, 2021). Social protection received limited consideration in the range of high-level global policy initiatives around displacement since 2016, and this is largely reflected in research. Nevertheless,

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over the last few years, something of a social protection turn has occurred in analysis of displacement, generating a new dynamic in the humanitarian–development nexus.

Since 2018, both research and policy has demonstrated much greater interest in social protection for displaced people. This trend has accelerated since 2020 due to the widespread use of cash transfers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hagen-Zanker & Both, 2021), reflecting a growing awareness that social protection has important advantages and provides a language to discuss a range of collective initiatives undertaken by displaced people. At the very least, it has provided new stimulus to tired debates around development responses to displacement. Much of this work applies a broad definition of **social protection** that encompasses support provided by both formal (states and humanitarian organizations) and a wide range of informal actors. We follow that wider understanding here, arguing that it has the potential to produce policy responses that are far more inclusive of displaced people.

Social protection is emerging as a key tool in a range of political projects associated with displacement. In development contexts, it has considerable potential to reduce poverty, support autonomy, and harmonize with existing community initiatives. The most significant claims for social protection only make sense when it is delivered as part of a broader framework that uses support to leverage other social impacts, such as tackling harmful gender norms (Jones, 2021). In these contexts, it has the potential to go beyond a safety net approach and have genuinely transformative impacts (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). As responses to displacement shift more to a development focus, the inclusion of displaced people in social protection systems can help provide more sustainable responses (International Labour

Organization [ILO], 2021). Yet there is also a danger that it becomes a justification for the withdrawal of wealthy donors from the more intractable situations of protracted displacement and a means of containing displaced people in low-income countries, trends that have been widely noted in the post-2016 global policy agenda (Zetter, 2019).

This paper reviews these very recent (post-2016) policy and research initiatives. It is based on extensive literature review, supplemented with discussions with eight academic and policy experts. It builds on a longer working paper as part of the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) research project (Collyer et al., 2022). This began with a systematic search of academic work on social protection and a variety of search terms related to displacement, using Scopus and Web of Science, between 2016 and 2023, which resulted in a selection of 97 relevant publications. Sources not indexed in those databases, such as working papers, blogs, and ongoing research, were identified through additional web searches and expert interviews. We identify four areas of ongoing focus: (a) tailoring social assistance to reflect gender and diversity, (b) mainstreaming social assistance for displaced people into existing national systems, (c) diversifying actors involved in the provision of social assistance, and (d) supporting self-sufficiency largely through market-led approaches. Each of these raises potential concerns in the design of social assistance systems, yet there are also more inclusive options that will enhance autonomy and freedom for displaced people.

A broad definition of social protection encompassing formal and informal sources of support is central to this argument. UNHCR follows the definition of the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (UNHCR, n.d. para. 4), which defines **social protection** as “a set of policies and pro-

grammes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their life-course, with emphasis on vulnerable groups.” The specific reference to “policies and programmes” is common in institutional definitions. In this paper, we follow broader definitions, encompassing not only state- and humanitarian-delivered support but also three other broad areas of informal support. First, when faced with major economic shocks, displaced people turn first to family or neighbours, labelled **refugee-led social protection** (Easton-Calabria & Pincock, 2018). Second, this may develop elements of institutionalization through **community-based informal mechanisms** (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2022, p. 8) such as rotating savings schemes. Third, displaced people with connections in other countries may benefit from regular remittances or **transnational social protection** (Levitt et al., 2017).

A conceptualization of social protection that includes both formal and informal mechanisms has particular value for our analysis. The inclusion of refugee-led and transnational social protection, in addition to formal support, provides a framework to help analyze how displaced people strategize across multiple sources of support. To manage this broader definition of social protection, this paper pays particular attention to social assistance. **Social assistance** is one component of social protection, which we define as cash or in-kind transfers that are non-contributory, regular, and therefore predictable (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2022).

The paper comprises four sections. The following section considers the particularities of social protection for displaced people and justifies the value of a more transformative application of social protection. The second section reviews the social protection content of a range of post-2016 policy initiatives

to bring humanitarian and development responses to forced displacement together in more detail. The third section turns to the more recent (post-2018) flourishing of research into social protection and displacement, considering access and delivery. The final section focuses attention on three areas of ongoing theoretical and policy debate: responding to gender and diversity and the roles of the state, market, and civil society in the provision of social protection.

ACCESS TO SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE

The idea that mobility weakens social protection (Banting & Koning, 2017) is based on three debatable assumptions: (a) displaced people could access at least some social protection before displacement, (b) social protection itself is tied to locations, and (c) access to social protection post-displacement is limited or absent. Although there is evidence to support all three assumptions, exceptions are increasingly common. “Opening access” to social protection for forcibly displaced people is increasingly apparent (Sabates-Wheeler, 2019), and the large-scale use of cash grants has gained legitimacy post-pandemic (Hagen-Zanker & Both, 2021). A small number of large-scale policy initiatives also suggests some directions for further research.

The three assumptions each have implications for post-displacement interventions. First, the existence of pre-displacement social protection depends on the displacement context. In low-income countries, social protection is limited, and people develop ways of coping and strategizing to gain access. Indeed, migration provides a form of household-level insurance against shocks (Lindley, 2009). The number of displaced people from middle-income countries including Syria, Venezuela, and Ukraine has grown.

Displaced people are more likely to have some experience of state-provided protection, and they may more readily seek this protection after displacement. Any intervention should start from an appreciation of the self-provisioning that displaced people are already engaged in prior to the intervention, so as not to disrupt or misdirect what may be more sustainable strategies.

The second assumption concerns the mobility of social protection. In wealthier countries, such as across the European Union (EU), the trend has been for increasing portability of social protection, highlighting the potential here. Some social assistance is open to everyone, regardless of citizenship; subsidies on essential products are an example. Given the expense of bureaucracy, more individualized forms of social assistance are typically tied to locations in low- and middle-income countries. In the very few examples where such protection is portable, such as India's Public Distribution System, migrants can shift location in certain, limited circumstances and even then require additional registration (Srivastava, 2020). This limited portability is not to be discounted, but for most displaced people, opportunities for continued provision of social protection by their state of origin are very limited. This is generally the case for internally displaced persons (IDPs) too, though there are certain notable exceptions where IDPs are well supported, such as Colombia. A key value of unofficial or informal assistance is that it is more likely than formal assistance to continue post-displacement. Remittances are one area where there is growing evidence of their value as a source of social protection (Levitt et al., 2017; Savage & Harvey, 2007).

The greatest policy change has been the increasing availability of social protection for displaced people post-displacement. This is the third assumption, where the picture

has changed significantly in recent years. This provides a way of sustainably linking humanitarian and development approaches. The "sedentary bias" (Brun, 2016) of traditional humanitarian support is based on an assumption that forcibly displaced people remain in a single displacement context until they return. In reality, displacement may be sequential or repeated. Humanitarian actors have often viewed movement other than return with suspicion, interpreting it as undermining the case for a claim to protection. Such movement may include circular returns or onward movement and may more accurately be interpreted as a way in which displaced people try to resolve their situation for themselves. Support for the mobile and non-mobile are increasingly planned together (e.g., Hillier et al., 2020) through a more universal approach to social protection.

Displaced people's eligibility for social protection often depends on post-displacement registration and categorization. More genuinely transformative social protection requires a degree of flexibility in this categorization. Mobility categorization is also significant since it typically determines the nature of a migrant's relationship with state authorities and their access to social protection (Zetter, 2007). From a migrant's perspective, this means that access to social protection appears to be unpredictable, even arbitrary. What should be a dynamic relationship between social protection and mobility is too often rigidly determined by categories that are increasingly rejected by those who are subject to them (Coddington, 2018).

The geography of social protection is also important. For decades, camps provided the template for organizing large-scale humanitarian protection for refugees; however, broad consensus has emerged that protracted displacement is being urbanized. Humanitarian programming for urban refu-

gees was deemed frivolous and unnecessary by UNHCR until at least the late 1990s (Crisp, 2017). Social protection programming in international development also has firmly rural roots. This is a challenge, but momentum has grown to rethink social protection for urban areas (Gentilini et al., 2021), accelerated by COVID-19 responses in many countries (Roelen et al., 2021).

SOCIAL PROTECTION IN POST-2016 INITIATIVES

The current round of global policy initiatives around forced displacement began with the 2016 **New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants** (United Nations General Assembly, 2016; hereafter New York Declaration). The **Global Compact on Refugees** (UN, 2018; hereafter Refugee Compact) and the **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration** (Global Compact for Migration, 2018; hereafter Migration Compact) followed in 2018. They have received near universal support from United Nations member states and have been at least partially welcomed by the various stakeholders concerned. Global attempts to resolve displacement crises must respond to the very different concerns of wealthier states of the Global North, which retain dominance in decision-making and finance, and those of the Global South, where most displaced people are hosted. New initiatives in the Refugee Compact are balanced by a clear objective to dissuade displaced people from moving to the Global North. This reveals the less explicit but widely noted objective of the containment of displacement crises in the Global South.

Both compacts were discussed alongside distinct global initiatives on development and (separately) humanitarianism, which also set the context for attempts to once again bridge this divide in a displacement

context. The UN General Assembly (UNGA, 2015, para. 2) described the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as “comprehensive, far-reaching and people centred,” providing a succinct summary of current attitudes to international development. The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 illustrated the continuing divide between humanitarianism and development, but also coined the language for current attempts to close it, in the humanitarian–development nexus. **Peace** has since been added to create a triple nexus. Both initiatives consider refugees in some way. The SDGs are more limited: only 1 of the 169 targets is dedicated to migration (10.7). The Agenda for Humanity, which arose from the World Humanitarian Summit, gives more prominence to migration and displacement, with 1 of the 24 strategic transformations devoted to each of them. The Grand Bargain is the second agreement related to the World Humanitarian Summit. It remains a core international agreement, though a substantial revision was approved in 2023, partially in recognition of the need to further strengthen the nexus approach in the light of ongoing focus on humanitarian response (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023, p. 2).

These agreements provide the framework for ongoing discussions of both national and international responses to forced displacement, particularly the social protection context. There is a long history to this. The provision of social and economic support to both citizens (including IDPs) and refugees is stipulated in at least 14 international conventions since the 1951 **Convention on the Status of Refugees**, which is itself startlingly inclusive on social rights of refugees. Five of these conventions are overseen by the ILO, beginning with the 1952 **Social Security Convention 102**, which is specific on the inclusion of non-nationals (International

[Labour Organization \[ILO\], 1952](#), art. 68). The basic principles of social protection are well established, though for non-nationals they are not well supported; as of October 2023, only 38 states had signed ILO Convention 102 since 1958.

The limited support of provision for non-nationals has historically resulted in a parallel system for refugees mostly provided by UNHCR. This includes regular large-scale distribution of food and non-food items, which although vital in certain circumstances have long been recognized as unsustainable ([Harrell-Bond, 1986](#)). Historically, UNHCR's social assistance for refugees has involved separate approaches from national governments, yet the organization's default is now to work with existing systems ([UNHCR, 2020](#)). The influential report into shock-responsive social protection by [O'Brien et al. \(2018\)](#) identifies five ways social protection may be delivered in crisis contexts in partnership between national governments and international organizations. Much of UNHCR's work, often delivered in partnership with the World Food Programme, falls under "alignment," the least integrated of these five approaches.

Social protection is only a detail in the post-2016 agreements. The 2016 New York Declaration is framed as broadly covering a wide range of situations of the forced displaced that go well beyond refugee movement ([UNGA, 2016](#), para. 1). The declaration and the resulting compacts have been criticized for leaving development undefined ([Zetter, 2019](#)). The document nevertheless contains some indications as to how development is understood, with regular references to the SDGs and calls for "long-term and sustainable solutions" ([UNGA, 2016](#), para. 10). Only a single reference is made to social protection, with a call to integrate refugees into national protection systems (para. 83).

Although this is not replicated directly in the Refugee Compact, it captures the direction of most current initiatives to integrate support for refugees into national systems.

The **Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF)** is Annex 1 of the New York Declaration and was incorporated into the Refugee Compact unchanged. In 19 paragraphs, it sets out the basis for a burden-sharing response for "large movements of refugees" ([UNGA, 2016](#), para. 4), though both the CRRF and the Refugee Compact leave **large** undefined ([Hathaway, 2018](#)). Although social protection is not mentioned directly in the CRRF, there is plenty of language to support social assistance initiatives, such as use of cash (para. 6(f)). The three traditional durable solutions are all referenced, although only voluntary return is emphasized (paras. 11, 12); resettlement is downplayed (para. 14(c)), and local integration is not mentioned at all in favour of a focus on responsibilities of host states (para. 13). Self-reliance is an important focus throughout (particularly paras. 11(b), (d)), coming to replace local integration in language that is characteristic of the CRRF in general. This shifts much of the burden of integration from states to displaced people themselves.

Like the CRRF, the Refugee Compact is not focused on all refugees but on large or protracted refugee movements (para. 11). It sets out to provide a basis for burden sharing (para. 3) guided by four objectives (para. 7): (a) ease pressure on host countries, (b) enhance refugee self-reliance; (c) expand access to third-country solutions, and (d) support conditions to allow return. There is only a single reference to social protection (para. 81). [Nimeh et al. \(2020\)](#) are critical of what they characterize as a failure to recognize the potential of social protection to provide more sustainable solutions. The

Refugee Compact’s “programme of action” does add more detail on the broader humanitarian development nexus, including to note “increasing recognition of the development challenges posed by large refugee situations” (para. 64). This recognition can quickly be traced to the 1970s (Crisp, 2001), highlighting how little is new on this aspect of the nexus. Rather than resolving the barriers that have separated humanitarian and development interventions with displaced people, the Refugee Compact provides new evidence of the nature of the barriers that are still to be overcome.

These international agreements represent the highest level of engagement on these issues—a set of guidelines for the next decade at least. The compacts have received a great deal of academic analysis, which provides a mixed picture (Collyer et al., 2022). This is not surprising, since the compacts provide only a framework with relatively few details. In terms of social protection, there are some indications of willingness to engage, particularly in the CRRF, and much of the language around mainstreaming social protection for refugees in national mechanisms of host states highlights a degree of political will for further developments in this area. Still, social protection is not a major focus of any of the documents. Substantial challenges remain with regard to implementation. The next section turns to these challenges, reviewing the analysis of current best practices and the beginnings of systematic research in this area.

DELIVERY OF SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE

There are two major trends in the delivery of social protection to displaced people: the continued shift to cash assistance and the inclusion of displaced people in national systems of social protection. A central aim of

this paper is to unite analysis of these trends with the growing recognition of informal forms of social assistance (Mumtaz, 2022), which is especially appropriate for displaced people. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated all three of these trends. UNHCR’s first systematic use of cash for refugees (as opposed to returnees) was with Iraqi refugees in Jordan in 2008 (Boeyink, 2019). UNHCR’s cash operations then expanded rapidly, to 33 countries by 2015 and over 100 in 2022 (UNHCR, 2024), although only a minority of these provide a basis for longer-term engagement with national social protection programs. UNHCR has highlighted the challenges of engaging with governments in this provision, reporting that refugees are able to access national education systems in two thirds of UNHCR operations, health care in less than 50%, and paid work in less than 40%; additionally, refugees are included in national development plans in less than 10% of cases (UNHCR, 2018). This report focused on 18 countries in more detail,¹ but found high levels of inclusion of displaced people in social safety nets in only 4: Ecuador, Niger, Pakistan, and Turkey. It concluded that full inclusion of displaced people in national social protection systems could happen in these 4 countries and was possible in a further 10. Most social protection systems for displaced people either are managed separately from state provision or are only at the very beginnings of integration with alignment to national systems; however, there are signs that this is beginning to change.

The same best-practice case studies appear regularly in this emerging literature, highlighting the relatively few cases in which these ideas have been implemented in support of displaced people (Andrade et al.,

¹ Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Colombia, Ecuador, Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela, Yemen.

2021). Programs to support forcibly displaced people in low- and middle-income countries are still relatively rare. Turkey's Emergency Social Safety Net is one of the largest, reaching approximately 1.75 million Syrian refugees, The EU's own reviews highlight its effectiveness, and it is more widely recognized (Andrade et al., 2021). Still, the substantial EU funding is explicitly part of a policy to contain Syrian refugees in Turkey (Cetinoglu & Yilmaz, 2020). This selection highlights a concentration of schemes in proximity to Europe, a pattern that others have been highly critical of Boeyink (2019).

Olivier de Sardan (2018) has criticized cash transfers in general as a "travelling model" that is applied increasingly widely on the basis of proven success in a few atypical situations (p. 30). The COVID-19 pandemic encouraged the view that a single response was universally applicable. This response has included increasing access for displaced populations in some situations. Expansion of social assistance for Venezuelan migrants has been widespread across Latin America, although this typically required regular migration status (International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, 2021). Brazil is often cited as an important example, and large numbers of Venezuelans access national cash-based social protection schemes, particularly the Bolsa Familia, although substantial regional variation exists (Shamsuddin et al., 2021). In North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, a study of 21 countries found that 9 had interventions to support foreign workers, all provided by governments, and 12 had measures to support refugees and IDPs, mostly cash-based and all provided by UN agencies (UN, 2020). A more recent global study of the inclusion of refugees in social assistance in 16 countries highlighted a significant disparity between provision provided by governments and by international organi-

zations (Hagen-Zanker & Both, 2021). In all cases, social assistance was limited, but the 10 new examples of state provision were less effective than UNHCR, UNICEF, or the World Food Programme provision that was aligned to state provision as these organizations had more complete registration details for refugees.

The need to adapt social assistance is vital (Olivier de Sardan, 2018). Hagen-Zanker and Both's (2021) study emphasizes policy design and delivery capacity as key elements of the delivery of social protection to displaced people that can be improved without additional finance. Registration and accurate data systems are particularly significant given the concerns raised by the range of biometric systems that are already in operation. The ethical issues raised by the potential exchange of privacy for basic social support are undoubtedly problematic. The fundamental question is how to interpret this changing landscape of social protection, which requires a more theoretical analysis than has been obvious in this recent, largely applied literature.

THEORIZING SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE

In this final section, we consider three areas where social assistance may form part of a more transformative solution: first around the implications of greater flexibility of support for concerns of gender, equality, and intersectionality; then in the diversification of actors; and finally, in efforts to find a more progressive interpretation of self-sufficiency and market access.

Gender, Equality, and Intersectionality

Attention to gender equality is a well-established feature of global policy towards displacement, and the two compacts, CRRF, and

wider current framework are no exception. This goes significantly beyond the grouping of “women and children” as an almost undifferentiated vulnerable group that has often characterized refugee policy. Current policy frameworks have been widely praised for their effective analysis of gender. UNHCR’s (2019) **Age, Gender and Diversity Policy** recognizes the significance of “intersecting personal characteristics” (“3. Rationale”), implementing insights associated with intersectionality, or the compound impacts of multiple disadvantages. In the social protection field, the **Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection** (GRASSP) framework, set out by UNICEF Innocenti (2020), provides a similarly ambitious, holistic approach. This framework outlines a set of goals targeting a gender-transformative approach that uses social protection to transform harmful gender norms.

The recent turn to social protection has highlighted the potential contribution that well-designed forms of social assistance can provide. A review of 22 research studies of cash-based transfers highlighted that 70% of them resulted in a reduction in intimate partner violence, even though this was not among the initial aims (Buller et al., 2018). Cash transfers alone cannot improve gender equality; indeed, in some cases, where social protection focuses on women only as caregivers, for example, it may further entrench gender norms (Jones, 2021). Yet even if social protection has not realized its full potential in this area (Holmes & Jones, 2013), there are certainly policy directions where a more transformative set of policy objectives are realizable around “cash plus” programs. The nature of these connections, beyond the reduction in levels of poverty that social protection should also produce, requires further investigation and frameworks, such as GRASSP, to provide a clear orientation.

The Diversity of Informal Actors

The determination of responsibility usually precedes considerations of protection and social assistance. Successive attempts to establish greater equality in responsibility have not met with any significant success (Betts, Costello & Zaun, 2017), and the Refugee Compact recognizes the “urgent need for more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world’s refugees” (para. 1)—although as most critiques recognize, it offers few remedies for this inequality (Chimni, 2018). States are the dominant focus of the Refugee Compact: to “ease pressures on host countries” is its first objective (para. 7). This reactive “solidarity with states” approach has been widely criticized in favour of a more proactive “solidarity with refugees” (Wagner, 2017). A more pragmatic focus on displaced people places the provision of protection before discussions of who is responsible for that provision.

This approach emphasizes the need for a much deeper understanding of forms of social assistance beyond (and, in the case of mass displacement, usually well before) formal avenues of support from states and humanitarian actors. Following the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, considerable discussion has occurred on the need for the localization of aid promoting the incorporation of specific southern actors into the “international humanitarian system.” Very little has translated into action. Despite signatories to the Grand Bargain committing to channelling at least 25% of international humanitarian assistance to local and national actors as directly as possible by 2020, trends in direct funding portray a more dismal picture, with direct funding to local and national actors accounting for a mere 1.2% of total humanitarian assistance in 2022 (Development Initiatives, 2023).

This highlights the need to diversify the range of actors involved. A long-standing barrier to this diversification has been the view among donors that ideological and faith-based grammars and vernaculars used by humanitarian actors of the Global South are fundamentally at odds with the core “international” humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011). In turn, locally embedded actors in situations of mass displacement equally view northern-mandated responses to crises in the Global South as being motivated by political and ideological concerns rather than a strict adherence to international humanitarian principles (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2018).

Rather than pondering which actors best fit the northern-mandated system of social and humanitarian assistance, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2018) argues for a closer reading of the diverse spatialities, relationalities, and conceptualizations that underpin South–South cooperation in fragile and crisis-affected settings. Space needs to be ceded to alternative histories and understandings of responding to crises that do not a priori begin with Western conceptions of humanitarianism. In doing so, how we understand southern-led responses to displacement and social protection are not fixed at the national or regional scale but allows us to consider, as legitimate, everyday neighbourhood-level responses.

With situations of mass displacement increasingly taking on an urban character, the focus of researchers has turned to the multiple (in)formal sovereignties (Carpi & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020) that contest the right to intervene in the humanitarian field. Scholarship has increasingly become attuned to local actors embedded in displacement responses, identifying the integral role of municipalities (Easton-Calabria, 2020) and

mandates outside the reasoning, structures, and networks of so-called formal humanitarian responses. This identification requires an analysis of multilevel governance, specifically, how different forms and spheres interact to provide social assistance. These different spheres may include faith-based and faith-inspired humanitarian action (Zaman, 2016), provision of aid from actors and agencies located outside of the Global North (Quadir, 2013), refugee-led responses (Pincok et al., 2020; Zaman, 2020), and “transnational social protection” (Levitt et al., 2017) delivered through remittances. Globally, analyses show that in the absence of active municipal governance—particularly in marginal conflict-affected or post-conflict settings—other mediators and providers of social protection emerge in the poorest urban areas. Actors can include traditional leaders, tribal networks, influential individuals, political parties, criminal gangs, labour brokers, militias, faith-based groups, and local committees (te Lintelo et al., 2020). This range of responses further diversifies sources of social assistance. At the very least, formal actors need to be aware of these patterns of disturbance so they can avoid delivering support in ways that disrupt existing patterns of solidarity.

Sustainability, Self-Reliance, and the Private Sector in the Context of Social Assistance

Like other aspects of the Refugee Compact, the central goal to “enhance refugee self-reliance” (para. 7) has a long history (Jacobsen & Fratkze, 2016). Plenty of evidence indicates that well-designed social assistance programs can support this objective, but there is far from universal agreement on this point. Support for livelihoods was justified as a move towards self-reliance when compared with a care and maintenance ap-

proach. Attention to sustainable livelihoods has been important to the longer-term objectives of shifting from humanitarian to development responses (Jacobsen, 2005). UNHCR's (2014) **Global Strategy for Livelihoods** defines **self-reliance** as "the ability of an individual, household or community to meet essential needs and to enjoy social and economic rights in a sustainable manner and with dignity" (p. 7). More recently, approaches to self-reliance have shifted from livelihoods to a broader context of economic inclusion, which "entails access to labour markets, finance, entrepreneurship and economic opportunities for all, including non-citizens in addition to vulnerable and underserved groups" (UNHCR, 2019, p. 3). In terms of social assistance, this obviously goes further than cash and could only be instituted through a cash plus approach.

The right to work and the wider focus on economic inclusion reflect a growing engagement with the private sector that remains controversial. Betts, Bloom, et al. (2017) laid out the argument for market-based solutions, although Skran and Easton-Calabria (2020) were concerned that this approach "risks uncritically overemphasising the positive addition of markets in refugee assistance" (p. 4). Despite a welcome reception in policy circles, Betts and Collier's (2017) book received even more stringent criticism for its uncritical call for market engagement. Although the **Jordan Compact** (a 2016 agreement between multiple donors and the Jordanian government) granted Syrian refugees the right to work and join contributory social protection schemes in Jordan, the take-up has been relatively small (Crawley, 2017). There are a range of reasons for this, including the demeaning nature of much work in special economic zones, but it highlights the wider practical problems of reliance on work as a potential durable solution

without assurances that the work is "decent," in [International Labour Organization \[ILO\] \(n.d.\)](#) terms.

There are also broader theoretical objections to the increasing role of the private sector in social protection responses. Zetter (2019, p. 1779) has set out one of the most comprehensive critiques of market access, and indeed the shift to development-led responses more generally, arguing that it maintains dependency of the "refugee impacted Global South" on the Global North. Zetter is suspicious of cash-based transfers and market access since they are often used to justify a transfer of responsibility away from states and towards refugees. A more guarded approach is necessary, but the connection between containment and social protection, especially in the most flexible form of cash, does not appear to be inevitable. Indeed, from a neoliberal perspective, social assistance is often criticized for undermining self-sufficiency since true self-reliance means managing without support (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). In the Global North, neoliberal policies are usually associated with concern around dependency and a corresponding **reduction** of welfare. Ferguson (2015) highlights a more contradictory pattern, noting that across southern Africa, neoliberal governments have been associated with an increase in cash-based social assistance. Increased cash assistance may be reconciled with a neoliberal focus on individual responsibility where it is accompanied by a withdrawal of state or donor support in other areas of social protection, such as health or education. This trend suggests that a focus on social assistance in isolation from other forms of social protection (as we have pursued in this article) should proceed with caution. Zetter and others (e.g., Adesina, 2020) offer a warning about the interests of the key actors and the language used,

but their arguments provide some options for well-designed, transformative forms of social protection and well-focused cash plus programs.

Both self-reliance and the associated turn to the private sector are potentially inclusive ideas that are now widely interpreted as a shorthand for containment policies, seeking to prevent further mobility of displaced people. Critical theoretical analysis must find alternative language to discuss developments that at least have the potential to allow a more inclusive approach to displacement (Morris, 2020). Hyndman and Reynolds (2020) suggest that self-reliance often lacks self-determination, and the term **self-determination** at least provides a way of discussing autonomy without the wider policy interpretation. A broad, transformative interpretation of social protection provides a way of doing this, particularly where it involves regular provision of sufficient cash support, an ideal basis for supporting self-determination for displaced people.

CONCLUSION

Social protection has generated growing interest in recent years as a way of providing more sustainable, equitable support for displaced people. Although it is only briefly referenced in the round of high-level policy initiatives since 2016, it provides a way of operationalizing the humanitarian–development nexus, which those documents prioritize. More recent research and, particularly, the rapid growth in cash-based social assistance during the pandemic have provided further impetus for this. We have argued that social assistance has great potential to enhance the agency of displaced people by providing greater choice, including reflecting differential perspectives in relation to gender, age, ethnicity and legal status; however, as Jones (2021) and others argue, this is only effective

in the case of more transformative cash plus initiatives. Social assistance also offers a way in which support to displaced people can recognize the significance of ongoing mobility. Given the novelty of many of these programs for displaced people, certainly at any significant scale, the extent to which this potential can be fulfilled remains uncertain.

Four broad areas will determine the extent of the success of social assistance in providing sustainable solutions to displacement. First, governance of social protection needs to reflect the ways in which informal actors are involved in design and provision. The Grand Bargain's localization agenda sets the context for this wider group of stakeholders in principle, but not yet in practice. The CRRF also references refugees' own involvement in framing policy initiatives; however, we have not been able to identify any examples of this occurring. Beyond this, effective and targeted solutions could recognize and support existing community initiatives, such as collective savings or transnational forms of social protection. Identifying the conditions that would allow refugee consultations in the provision of social protection would form an important contribution to the selection of best-practice examples that circulate widely in this literature.

Second, social assistance alone, either cash or in-kind, will not deliver the kinds of changes that are required if the transformative potential of frameworks such as GRASSP is to be realized. Support must therefore be provided alongside wider programs that recognize and address the barriers to advancing equalities across societies.

The third key area of focus concerns the modalities of registration. As social protection is increasingly provided to displaced people through existing national systems, the nature of registration is key, and where it allows flexibility of location, further mobility within

and even beyond national borders may be supported. The use of onward mobility as an established household strategy to spread risk in crisis situations will be reinforced. Flexibility is also required to ensure that social protection takes account of intersectional requirements of displaced people.

Finally, social protection is widely justified in terms of enhancing self-reliance. This idea has become entangled with a set of more neoliberal priorities, associated with an emphasis on individualized responsibility, reduction of donor support, and ultimately continued containment in the Global South. Tremendous inequalities in support for displaced people will only be further exacerbated. We have argued that this connection is rhetorical rather than theoretical. Self-reliance also gestures towards individual freedom, choice, and autonomy, which are important principles to maintain. The language to discuss this must be chosen carefully. The political intentions of the term **self-reliance** mean that it must be abandoned in any critical investigation in favour of alternative expressions such as **self-determination**. The extent to which the involvement of informal actors, transformative approaches, flexible registration, and genuine self-determination can be achieved will determine if social protection can finally offer a means to operationalize long-standing objectives of combining humanitarian and development responses.

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