

Cooperative Responses to Refugee Crises

At a time of the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II, cooperatives may be able to play a critical role in alleviating suffering by offering vital services not otherwise available in the local economy or in refugee camps, while providing job opportunities, potential training and long term community benefits.

Cooperative Enterprise Model

Cooperatives are enterprises that place people before profit. They uphold values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. They practice honesty, openness and social responsibility in their operations. As values-driven businesses they have a role – and a responsibility – in helping to promote decent work for all, including people with disabilities.

Box 1: What are cooperatives?

A cooperative is defined by both the International Co-operative Alliance and the International Labour Organization as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise”.

Source: International Co-operative Alliance. Available online at <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

Refugee Response

The latest UNHCR figures show a dramatic rise in the number of refugees around the world, reaching 14.4 million in 2014, with half of them in Asia. This number does not include the 5.1 million Palestinians who have been refugees over many decades in the Middle East. Today, Turkey alone is estimated to host more than 2.7 million Syrian refugees. In a crisis situation, host country governments are often overwhelmed. Humanitarian services from relief organizations and country governments’ budgetary contributions can only go so far. Hence community based solutions are needed.

Cooperatives can and do appear in all phases of refugee crisis response and contribute significantly to refugees’ and internally displaced peoples’ (IDP) livelihoods and overall wellbeing. They have been put to good use by refugees and host communities at different stages of intervention from the start of the crisis to integration of new arrivals in the host country and reintegration of IDPs when they return to their own communities. Cooperatives have stepped in to provide direct assistance to refugees and deliver basic goods and services. They have been set up with refugees as members and workers to serve refugees. Refugees have also joined existing cooperatives in growth oriented sectors of host country economies as members and workers. They can also benefit from services of cooperatives as users of such services even when these cooperatives may not have been set up especially for refugees.

ILO Study on Cooperatives and Refugees: Findings

A recent study undertaken by the ILO provides insights from the literature and incorporates reflections of a wide range of humanitarian and development aid workers from community based organizations to INGOs and international governmental organizations engaged in refugee crisis response. The study is intended to inform the ILO and its constituents of the relevance of cooperatives in creating economies of scale, ownership and control among members and cohesion across communities by refugee associations at the global and local levels. It is also meant to provide the cooperative movement with inputs in coordinating their responses for augmenting the impact of their interventions. One of the main findings of the study is that both the literature and those with direct experience working with cooperatives support the integration of the cooperative model in more substantive ways into refugee response strategies.

Other findings of the study include:

- As people-centered businesses cooperatives services and goods (e.g., care services, housing services) that are important for refugees and not as readily available through other enterprises.
- Different from economic migrants, refugees need integrated responses from livelihoods to health and child care services and psychological assistance. Cooperatives have developed integrated practices suited to refugee needs.
- The nature of working collectively in a cooperative business helps advance agency and resilience among refugees
- The fact that cooperatives are well grounded in local communities, and devise a joint response to common needs makes it easier for them to be accepted by the host communities fostering inter-communal peace.
- Cooperative projects designed with active participation of host communities that benefit them as well as the refugees helps eliminate resistance to acceptance of refugees.

ILO Study on Cooperatives and Refugees: Examples from the Field

The ILO study also highlights examples of 27 cooperatives that are involved in responding to refugee needs in different contexts and identifies a number of conclusions regarding cooperative responses to refugee crises.

Cooperatives that already exist in host countries undertake a range of outreach services for refugees:

[RUAH](#) is a social cooperative based in Bergamo, a northern Italian town, and works with refugees, providing and working on housing, work, literacy, education, training and integration issues. In 2015, Italian social cooperatives like RUAH provided 18,000 refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with services and projects in 220 welcome centres and 170 dedicated housing structures. In Germany, [housing cooperatives in a number of cities, including Gelsenkirchen in the northwest](#), have started reserving larger apartments for refugee families and consciously renting them to Syrian refugees.

Cooperative interventions targeting host communities can benefit refugees as members and workers:

Through its [Purchase for Progress \(P4P\) initiative](#), the World Food Programme has been procuring staple items for emergency food assistance to refugees through producer cooperatives in 20 countries. Such procurement practices that involve and benefit host communities in refugee response can help release tensions and serve toward peace and social justice. Of the one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, 200,000 have settled in the Akkar region in the north of the country, doubling the population of one of Lebanon's poorest regions. Agriculture constitutes a major source of income, employing one-fourth of the workers in the region. UNDP and ILO have supported the establishment and growth of a [Green House Nursery Cooperative](#), which treats, grows and sells seeds at an affordable price in the region benefiting 200 Lebanese farmers and Syrian refugees.

Livelihoods interventions in refugee camps can be provided through cooperative enterprises:

Cooperatives of refugees have been established in refugee camps with assistance from refugee aid organizations. UNHCR helped refugee women develop crafts cooperatives in countries like Morocco. Danish Refugee Council have promoted the establishment of producer cooperatives in the refugee camps in Uganda. In the West Bank, [Kalandia Refugee Camp Women's Handicraft Cooperative](#) provides Palestinian women with income (handicrafts, dried fruits, tailoring and quilting among other activities) as well as vocational training (i.e. accounting) and runs a kindergarten and a nursery.

Cooperatives have been established in host countries for the sole purpose of serving refugee communities' needs:

Established in 1998, [MCHB is a worker cooperative in Canada](#) with 75 worker-members who are immigrants and former refugees themselves. MCHB helps 2,000 migrant and refugee families each year to access services from perinatal education with maternal/infant health outreach and early parenting and early childhood development support to intercultural childcare services; multicultural family support for children with disabilities, collaborative work with local child and family services, and health and mental health support for the most vulnerable populations. It connects families to cultural community groups/resources and designs and delivers cross-cultural care training to care providers.

Cooperatives play a role when refugees return home to rebuild their countries and can assist in peace building as well:

In many countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Timor-Leste, El Salvador, Guatemala, Lebanon, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Nepal, cooperatives have played a critical role in post-conflict reconstruction by creating jobs for returning minorities and ex-combatants, rebuilding businesses and homes, giving refugees and IDPs access to markets, facilitating reconciliation and re-establishing relationships torn apart by war by having different groups working together in a common objective- the advancement of the cooperative's mission. In [Sri Lanka, the ILO's Local Empowerment through Economic Development \(LEED\)](#) project helped the victims of Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war by supporting them through cooperatives: fishermen who lost their boats are now back at sea, and farmers are learning to get better yields and war widows are running businesses.

Cooperatives are demonstrating their value in helping refugees and IDPs. Cooperative organizations can be natural partners in global, national and local refugee response to give hope and rebuild lives, in support of peace. Therefore the cooperative enterprise model needs to be better integrated into refugee response strategies. And cooperative organizations need to be sought out for their knowledge and experience in responding to refugee crises.