A Conceptual Framework for Understanding and Measuring Refugee Self-Reliance
Background

Given the changing nature of forced displacement – increasingly urban and protracted – and the growing sense that self-reliance is a critical component of refugee response in many contexts, RefugePoint and the Women’s Refugee Commission began prioritizing its measurement in order to know when and how self-reliance was achieved or increased. This knowledge could strategically inform program design and resource allocation. Building on their initial independent work, the two organizations brought together a community of practice to deepen the humanitarian community’s understanding of self-reliance and collective action toward facilitating it.

The community of practice, now called the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, agreed on a definition of self-reliance, drawn largely from UNHCR’s definition: “Self-reliance is the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet their essential needs in a sustainable manner.” Emphasizing not just economic but social factors was deemed important by the group.

Based on that definition, the Self-Reliance Index (SRI) was conceived as an easy-to-use tool to measure how well a household is sustainably meeting its basic needs over time. It was agreed that the tool should aim for simplicity to facilitate practitioner use and employ language that is universal for global application, while allowing for local contextualization.

The SRI was developed through an inclusive and iterative process that is on-going. Version 1.0 underwent multiple rounds of field-testing in various contexts and was adjusted based on validity and reliability testing, resulting in Version 2.0 being released in May 2020. The rigorous and participatory process of developing the SRI helped hone the conceptual framework for self-reliance presented here. More information on the development of the SRI and its conceptual underpinnings can be found in “Better Lives Now: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding and Measuring Refugee Self-Reliance.”
Conceptual Framework

The Self-Reliance Index 2.0 includes twelve domains, four of which are focused on a household’s **BASIC NEEDS** (Housing, Food, Education and Health Care). The next four domains – Employment, Financial Resources, Assistance and Debt – focus on the **RESOURCES** needed to secure basic needs and factors that either insulate these critical needs or imperil them. The final four domains – Savings, Safety, Social Capital, and Health Status – are indicators of **SUSTAINABILITY**. They measure conditions and assets that may allow refugees to weather shocks, increasing the likelihood that they will be able to continue meeting their basic needs in the future.
As reflected in the graphic above, at the core are the basic needs central to all human life. Often humanitarian response ends at addressing these basic needs. Increasing self-reliance requires moving beyond meeting the most basic needs (center circle) to understanding the resources available (or not) to a household to furnish its basic needs (middle ring), and finally, understanding how safety and social capital, as well as assets such as savings and health, either enable or impede a household to sustainably meet its basic needs (outer ring).

Domain Selection

The SRI development process manifested a constant tension between including the fewest domains possible to ensure ease of use, while capturing sufficient information to gain a solid understanding of self-reliance. This required setting aside some household information (however important) that was deemed peripheral to that understanding. Creating a universal tool also required language that was broad and flexible. The SRI training curriculum and user guide recommend that implementers first agree on a common understanding of response options based on their local context, especially vis-a-vis housing, food, education and health care. As an example, pre-school is mandatory from the age of four in Mexico while in Jordan school age begins at six. Housing options also vary greatly by location. A challenge in creating the SRI was to ensure that it was written in a way that allows for this local contextualization.

As described above, while the SRI captures the holistic needs of a household, it also captures the resources available for each household to attend to these needs, and the middle ring reflects these resources. These domains were the most significantly adjusted in the course of the testing process based on the feedback and lived experiences of refugees. Interviews revealed the challenges faced by many refugee households to meet their health care and housing costs. These challenges then result in refugees developing complex and sometimes dangerous coping mechanisms to address their needs. It was important to build the tool to adequately capture this complexity.

At first glance it might seem counterintuitive that Assistance and Debt are included among the Resources domains or that they are included in a self-reliance measurement tool at all, since both are forms of external help. In designing the tool, an early decision was made that it should measure both standard of living and self-reliance (that is, how the standard of living is afforded). If the SRI only told us that a family was self-reliant in terms of receiving no external aid but not whether its standard of living was adequate, the finding would be meaningless. The goal is clearly not
for people living in poverty and privation to be considered self-reliant simply because they receive no aid. That could not be considered a positive outcome and does not track the definition of self-reliance agreed upon. It is therefore important to measure both whether basic needs are being met and how they are being met. Assistance and debt are often important means of meeting basic needs while a family progresses towards self-reliance. It is precisely this progression that the tool measures.

The domains in the outer ring facilitate or limit the sustainability of a household meeting its basic needs. Early versions of the tool contained a domain that aimed to understand aspects of mental health, whether framed as psychosocial well-being, hope for the future, or self-perception of circumstances (many variations were tried). In testing the SRI, these concepts proved difficult and unreliable to measure, yielding information that was not actionable or even trusted. What is more, given the varying experiences among family members, it was not possible to extrapolate an aggregate answer for an entire household. It was also found that asking questions about their future outlook left some respondents feeling depressed and distressed, which did not comport with the “do no harm” principle.

Each of the domains underwent extensive testing, iteration and modification. Domains that proved overly challenging to measure, such as psychosocial well-being, were ultimately dropped while others, such as water and sanitation, were not included as standalone domains as the information was captured through another domain (in this case housing), and/or were deemed not essential to understanding self-reliance. The twelve domains that ultimately comprise the Self-Reliance Index 2.0 are those that gained the greatest consensus from the broad base of practitioner and refugee stakeholders who provided input into the development process and that demonstrated high levels of validity and reliability during testing.

Conclusion

Capturing only the most vital information that tells us most of the household story is an imperfect science. Much detail is neglected for the sake of efficiency and ease of use. However, a tool such as the Self-Reliance Index provides humanitarian practitioners with a starting point for capturing our collective impact and a means to easily gather the necessary data to document refugee households’ movement towards self-reliance over time.

For more information on using the SRI, please refer to the SRI training curriculum and user guide.