

Critical criteria for successful designing of refugee self-reliance programming

The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative focuses on three inter-linked pillars which collectively aim to improve self-reliance programming. The first pillar is measuring the impact of programs to learn what works best, where and for whom. The second is scaling successful programs that assist refugees on their journey towards self-reliance, and the third is advocating for refugee self-reliance. This includes advocating with hosting governments to expand the opportunities for refugees to exercise their rights and enable self-reliance and with donors to fund self-reliance programming, based on research and evidence.

Programming for self-reliance is complex with little evidence to indicate that there is a one size fits all approach that works. Given that, we have outlined and amplified key standards and criteria, to consider when embarking on self-reliance programming.

UNHCR definition of Self-Reliance

Self-reliance is defined by UNHCR as the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health, and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity. Achieving self-reliance enables refugees to participate in the social and economic life of their host communities and contribute to rebuilding their countries should they be able to return.

The literature indicates that at the core of self-reliance are the four basic needs central to all humanitarian responses. Often humanitarian response ends at addressing these basic needs. Self-reliance requires moving beyond meeting the most basic needs (Please see figure 1 center circle) to understanding the resources available (or not) to a household that protect or imperil its basic needs (middle ring). Further, understanding how environmental factors such as safety and social capital, as well as assets such as savings and health, are critical to either enable or impede a household to sustainably meet its basic needs.

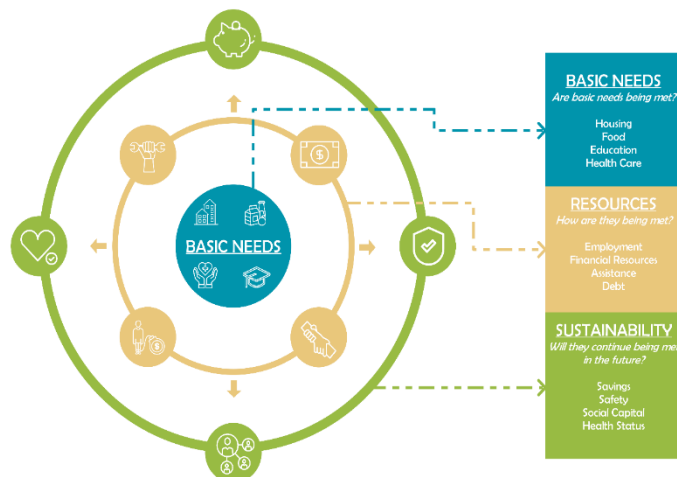


Figure 1: Resources needed to achieve refugee self-reliance

Holistic Approach

A self-reliance approach relies on the understanding that both economic and social well-being are pivotal for refugee prosperity. Economic opportunities often serve as a corner stone for refugee self-reliance, but these opportunities need to be coupled with access to educational resources, psychosocial services, health and health care, housing, social and community networks, local public services and markets, transportation, food security, and clean water and sanitation in order to achieve refugee inclusion and sustainable outcomes (Please see figure 1). Self-reliance is built on a foundation of legal protection for refugees. Access to documentation to be part of a society and unlock resources is critical for refugees achieving self-reliance.

Self-reliance Program Criteria

The key criteria that should be considered when designing self-reliance programming includes the inclusion of assessments, the gathering and use of disaggregated data, proper targeting, reasonable time frame planning, the inclusion of partnerships – including with Refugee Led Organizations (RLOs), and impact measurement. Each component is detailed below.

Are you meeting people where they are?

Data gathered pre-program design are vital to choosing the right intervention and the right target clients.

- **Baseline assessments** – Assessments must include data gathering pre-program design, which is vital to choosing the right intervention and the right target population. These assessments should always include market assessments/labor market assessments, and gender analyses to understand market needs and opportunities as well as women’s and men’s current workloads, availability, and the challenges and opportunities presented based on gender roles and social norms.
- **Assessments of available resources** – Existing support structures and systems should be identified including government, community-based organizations, NGO, or UN services that are available along with a review of potential referral mechanisms.
- **Assessment of skills and assets** - Programs inadequately assess refugees’ existing skill sets in order to further capacitate them, tap them, and link them to market opportunities. All refugees possess skills whether or not those skills have previously been monetized – from childcare and domestic work to farming, tending crops, and raising animals.

Existing Resources:

Economic Inclusion and Livelihoods - While self-reliance expands beyond livelihoods programming, excellent work has been done to build guidance for economic programming. [UNHCR’s 2015 operational guidelines](#) on self-reliance programming aims to ensure operations meet the minimum criteria for livelihoods programming and outlines the critical components of successful self-reliance programming, many of which overlap here.

Other livelihoods tools from practitioner experts include:

- [Cash Learning Partnership \(CaLP\) - Minimum Standard for Market Analysis \(MISMA\)](#)
- [LEGS - Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards](#)

Comprehensive Social Services Tools

- [A Review of Needs Assessment Tools, Response Analysis Frameworks, and Targeting Guidance for Urban Humanitarian Response](#)

Are you designing the programs people need?

Programs should be designed based on the expressed needs, the existing skill sets of the target population, and a clear understanding of the operating environment. As such, the design of programs should be human centered, holistic, and with identified referral pathways for complementary programs and services. The design should include a sustainable exit strategy. Program success should be clearly defined so that both success and failure can be honestly evaluated.

- **Human centered:** The design of programs should be human centered, that is, built on the expressed needs, priorities, aspirations, and skills sets of the target population, holistic, and with identified referral pathways for complementary programs and services.
- **Targeting:** The humanitarian imperative is to target those most in need. However, the neediest individuals are often least likely to succeed in livelihood programs due to limited education, lack of previous experience, and ongoing vulnerabilities and may need other stabilizing programs before entering a livelihoods intervention. As such, practitioners need to consider targeting households rather than individuals and assess which household members are most likely to succeed in interventions targeting them - recognizing that their success is going to impact and reduce the vulnerability of all members of the household. Transparent criteria for client targeting are imperative to reduce tensions between participants selected and those not selected. Including vulnerable host community members is advised to reduce xenophobia and improve refugee and host community relations.
- **Timing:** The timing of economic and related interventions that enhance self-reliance is critical to their success. Considerations include whether to implement early before negative coping mechanisms are created or later when situations have stabilized or following psycho-social support so that trauma doesn't interfere with participation and success.
- **Policy environment:** Understanding the local policy environment and how that enables or impedes access to opportunities and resources is critical for program design. If refugees are relegated to the informal market, that limits but does not preclude efforts to promote self-reliance. Advocacy around the realization of refugee rights is crucial as is availing of those opportunities that do exist; if those opportunities exist only in the informal economy, how can they be made as safe and dignified as possible. Numerous resources

The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative

exist to better understand the policy environment along with excellent resources on meaningful refugee participation can be found through the [Global Refugee-Led Network](#).

Comprehensive Social Services Criteria & Standards

- [The Sphere Handbook](#)
- [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action \(CPMS\)](#)
- [Minimum Standards for Education](#)
- [Minimum Economic Recovery Standards \(MERS\) - SEEP Network](#).

Is your program realistic?

- **Reasonable timeframe:** The timing of interventions that enhance self-reliance is critical to their success. For instance, seasonal factors may affect the success of an intervention. Other considerations may include whether to carry out an intervention when the situation of the targeted population has stabilized or following psycho-social support so that their trauma will not interfere with their participation. Practitioners should also consider the optimal time frame for an intervention and recognize that the journey toward self-reliance typically takes longer than a few months.

Are you coordinating with others?

- **Support mechanisms:** Identify existing support structures and systems. For example, are there government, UN or INGO resources that can provide for some of the basic needs while the household is getting on its feet? How long will those resources and support last? Without consumption support, cash and in-kind assistance might be used to meet basic needs rather than as investments in a longer-term livelihood. As such, it is critical to ensure households are able to meet their basic needs before considering some livelihood interventions such as an asset transfer.
- **Partnerships:** Practitioners should assess if and how local civil society organizations, development actors, and the private sector can be engaged and leveraged to strengthen components of the proposed project through, for example, outreach, assistance with targeting, job placements, mentorship, the facilitation of access to existing programs, or direct implementation of portions of the proposed intervention. Special emphasis should be placed on engaging refugee-led organizations in the design and implementation of interventions and include sufficient funding for them.
- **Referral mechanisms:** Given the holistic nature of a self-reliance approach, it is important to look beyond identification of partners and other services to establish clear and easy to use referral mechanisms for refugee clients. If your client needs health care but your organization doesn't provide health services, do you know where they should go? If your client cannot access your program because they have no documentation, do you know how to help them get registered?

How will you measure your impact?

- **Monitoring tools:** Monitoring should include direct input and feedback from program participants and opportunities to course correct if the program is not succeeding or maximizing its potential impact. Monitoring should also include impacts on the wider community and markets. Unintended consequences should be identified and assessed in program implementation. For example, if the program targeted women's economic participation, has it led to unintended consequences such as the eldest daughter being pulled from school to take on the childcare responsibilities?
- **Data aggregation:** Data should be disaggregated by age, gender, and other diversities to understand the needs and opportunities of diverse populations. Disaggregated data should be used when assessing their access to and utilization of basic services as well as the diversity of existing skill sets within the target population.
- **Evaluation:** The impact of the program on participating households and individuals should be assessed at the conclusion or ideally several months after the conclusion of the intervention. The time and costs for such should be built into project proposals and funding streams. It is critical to analyze and learn from both success and failure. Document what didn't work so that it does not get repeated. Many programs measure outputs or outcomes, the number of people trained, the number of loans given and repaid, few measure the impact on households' self-reliance and their ability to sustainably meet their own needs.
- **Exit strategy:** Even the best programs may have limited longer-term impact if thoughtful, robust exit strategies aren't built into program design and implementation at the start. Exit strategies should focus on the sustainability of program's results and ensure that progress towards self-reliance continues for target households and individuals long after the program has concluded. Too often, exit strategies are *ad hoc* and more often based on the lack of continued funding rather than the achievement of results.

Existing resources:

- [The Self-Reliance Index](#)
- [UNHCR AGD tools](#)

Is your organization set up to deliver?

Even the best designed programs fail in implementation. These failures might result from poor execution of the design, flaws in targeting, or weak analysis. Implementation should be based on expressed needs of the population and their engagement, participation, and buy-in.

- **Resourcing – personnel and funding:** Appropriate resourcing refers to ensuring expertise exist on the staff to implement the program and that adequate financial resources have been secured for thoughtful, strategic implementation including for evaluation and follow up to assess program impact.

Self-Reliance Program Criteria Checklist

Timing

Have you assessed the timing of the intervention? Is it the right time to proceed forward? Will it contribute to further stability and reduce dependency on humanitarian aid?

Partnerships

Have you identified and established partnerships with available and organizations? Have you clarified roles and responsibilities, benchmarks and timelines? Have you established referral mechanisms?

Assessments

- Have you conducted a baseline assessment on the existing socio-economic, and health conditions of refugees?
- Have you identified available resources that can be provided on other actors prior to program design?

Monitoring

Have you developed a clear plan for when monitoring activities will take place and by whom? Does the plan include direct feedback from participants? Have you developed a process for changing course if implementation is not meeting targets?

Disaggregated data

Have you included AGD tools in your assessments to inform your program choice, design, and target clients?

Evaluation

Have you planned and budgeted for a program evaluation? Will it be external/independent? Have you developed indicators measuring the impact on households' self-reliance?

Targeting

Based on your assessments, have you decided on which clients you will target and why? Have you included vulnerable host community members?

Exit strategy

Does your program include a plan on how program results will be sustained? Is there a handover plan to local organizations or the host government?