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Local networking for the integration of forced migrants

Key insights from the TRAFIG project

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New displacement in 2022 pushed the number of people forcibly displaced globally to more than 108 million – more than the populations of Italy and Spain combined. Many forced migrants find themselves in 'protracted displacement' situations, where they experience long-term vulnerability, dependency, and legal insecurity, lacking or denied opportunities to rebuild their lives. The EU-funded Transnational Figurations of Displacement (TRAFIG) research project investigated why people fall into protracted displacement situations and what coping strategies they use, with a focus on networks and mobility. Over the course of three years, the TRAFIG team engaged with more than 3,100 people, including displaced persons, policymakers, and practitioners in 11 countries across East Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. This included a survey of 1,900 displaced persons: Congolese persons displaced within the DRC and people who moved from their countries of origin to Ethiopia, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and Pakistan.

TRAFIG research findings underscored the importance of networks for displaced persons looking to secure a sustainable future and for policymakers and practitioners looking to support them, including when it comes to their integration. This paper highlights the role of local networking in settling in and shares how humanitarian, development, and integration actors can take these findings on board in the search for more sustainable solutions to global displacement.

Local networking is a key strategy for enabling displaced persons to find information, access services, secure housing, navigate an asylum procedure, land a job, and develop a sense of belonging. Connections are an essential source of support for settling into a new community, including logistical, emotional, and financial support. In helping a displaced person connect with someone else, an existing connection often sets in motion a 'chain of connectivity' that helps newcomers expand their network – and thus the potential opportunities available to them. Displaced persons are embedded in a multitude of networks, new and old, formal and informal, but conflict can disrupt these connections. Policies and programmes should thus seek to foster local networking among displaced persons and other community members as part of their response to displacement, thereby maximising the benefits of this powerful tool. Personal and professional contacts, and family ties in particular, play an important role in building connections, but organisations can also step in to help displaced persons to expand their networks.

The quality of connections is more important than the quantity. Local networks are important for displaced persons, but their quantity and quality vary. Taking Congolese IDPs as a case in point, researchers found that knowing a more powerful or better integrated individual could be more helpful than having a large number of contacts who are also in a vulnerable situation. Similarly, researchers in Ethiopia found that networks provide key emotional and material support for refugees, including providing information about employment opportunities, helping to obtain business licences, supporting integration, and covering living costs. Here, too, the quality of networks was an important factor, while the ability to provide financial support was a critical element. The TRAFIG team in Tanzania found that neighbours and community members help refugees access services, banking, and jobs – but some refugees faced serious problems, such as sexual abuse or not being (re)paid, after trusting the 'wrong' person. It is not just networks, but the right networks, that can provide meaningful support.

Positive intergroup relations are a foundation for successful network building, and interactions play an important part in fostering these. NGO-run religious and youth arts courses enabled Syrians and Jordanians in Jordan to learn together and

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were appreciated by those refugees able to make new connections through these programmes. Indeed, some Syrians living in Jordan have attributed a lack of stronger relationships with Jordanians to a dearth of such activities aimed at fostering intergroup interactions and building a sense of community. While course-based interactions emerge from formal programming, many interactions take place over the course of daily life, whether during day-to-day activities or in spaces provided by NGOs for this purpose. Mosques are key spaces of interaction in Jordan, while in Greece, established migrant/diaspora communities and activists offer spaces in which people belonging to different ethnic groups can socialise. Afghans and Pakistanis, usually those sharing a similar socioeconomic background, interact daily in Pakistan's shops, residential areas, schools, and mosques. For refugees in Dar es Salaam, churches and NGOs have provided a safe and supportive environment. In Ethiopia, female refugees frequently establish new connections through markets, mill houses, and religious events; however, single mothers reported finding it particularly difficult to make and keep connections because their mobility within and beyond camps is more limited. In Jordan, some superficial relationships have grown more substantial over time, turning neighbours into friends. Interactions have the potential to build trust and alliances, paving the way for integration and, ideally, cooperation.

A common background can support local networking, but is not the only factor. Family members are particularly important connections in the networks of displaced persons, including when it comes to settling in a new community. For instance, family and friends provided Congolese IDPs and forced migrants in Greece with temporary shelter. A shared geographic or ethnic background has helped many displaced persons create new ties. In Germany, Greece and Italy, co-nationals help newer arrivals to find jobs, offering them advice, acting as intermediaries, or hiring them directly. They also help them navigate the asylum procedure and social services. Similarly, IDPs and refugees who were displaced earlier help newer arrivals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Germany, Greece, and elsewhere. Congolese IDPs with a similar ethnic background as the majority group in the city of Bukavu often find it easier to access support networks, while joining labour associations can help displaced persons and locals sharing a common profession to find (and market to) clients. For Eritrean refugees from the Afar and Kunama ethnic groups, shared kinship, language, and culture with those in northern Ethiopia have helped to foster a sense of solidarity that has underpinned good refugee-host relations and supported local integration. Additionally, those from other ethnic groups, such as volunteers, can also be important contacts for displaced persons, offering aid, connecting forced migrants to jobs, helping them navigate the asylum system, and assisting with the housing search – or even offering accommodation directly. Economic opportunities can help to create alliances as well: TRAFIG found that Tanzanians value refugees'

entrepreneurial skills and ideas, and want to partner with and learn from them. Sponsors, whether these are new contacts or family members, can support the integration (as well as the mobility) of those arriving via community sponsorship or humanitarian admission programmes. It is clear that a range of people and actors have an important role to play in local networking.

The political discourse impacts intergroup relations. In Pakistan, generally strong social cohesion has deteriorated amidst government messages connecting Afghan refugees with terrorism and insecurity. The narrative in Greece has also shifted from one of solidarity to increased hostility towards newcomers, with negative repercussions for intergroup relations. Interestingly, research in Italy found that, although the national discourse is important, the local context (meaning socio-economic conditions as well as the cultural and historical background of a place) is paramount. Narratives are clearly more than talk: They impact opportunities for networking, with important implications for displaced persons and the communities in which they live.

Despite their benefits, networks can have downsides. While playing a vital role, personal networks can also lead to dependencies and exploitation. Displaced persons still face the risk of wrongdoing by actors within their local networks, such as through labour exploitation. TRAFIG research in Italy and Greece provided evidence of ways in which family and co-ethnic networks may also be experienced as disabling, hampering aspirations to move out of protracted displacement. The risk of fraud and exploitation, with limited options for seeking redress, was observed for joint business ventures in Jordan, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, for which refugees needed to rely on locals to obtain a business licence for being able to pursue their business at all. Weak or informal ties can leave displaced persons especially vulnerable to changes such as the death of a benefactor or loss of a job. Moreover, not everyone has a local network – or necessarily wants to tap into it – including those who fear stigma following sexual assault or forced recruitment into armed groups and those who feel restricted by traditional cultural norms. Additional formal support networks can thus help more displaced persons to find more stability. For all its benefits, the dynamic nature of networking will mean there is space for harmful actors to operate and negative effects to manifest.

Policy considerations

→ **Balance the narrative:** Because positive relations can help set the stage for local networking, receiving countries and communities should include positive messages about displaced persons, including their contributions and ambitions, to promote a more balanced discourse and engender mutual understanding that can help foster positive interactions. Teaching about migration in schools is one way of

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developing mutual understanding and social cohesion in younger generations. Raising awareness about displaced persons among employees in key government agencies interacting with them, and providing inter-cultural training for these staff, can also generate more positive encounters that support inclusion.

→ **Increase opportunities for interaction:** Programming can encourage networking among displaced persons and between displaced persons and locals through activities that reach both groups. This could happen by tapping into spaces where daily interactions occur informally. In Europe, this can already start during the reception phase, with reception centres facilitating interactions between centre residents and local community members (including those who migrated earlier). Governments can increase support for civil society organisations (including diaspora and migrant-led organisations), who are often the first point of contact for arrivals, to conduct such activities.

→ **Foster new connections:** Those with relatively smaller networks or who face particular challenges in building their networks, such as single mothers or those with smaller ethnic communities in destination countries, could be targeted for additional support. This could take the form of, for instance, mentoring initiatives and other programming aimed at interacting and networking.

→ **Engage and support the diaspora:** Recognising the important role of diaspora individuals and organisations, and proactively reaching out to and supporting them, would enable diasporas to further assist their displaced compatriots. Policymakers can fund technical assistance, knowledge exchange, and other capacity building for diaspora-, refugee-, and migrant-led groups, especially those from newer or less represented communities. Additionally, integration agencies should actively seek diaspora input and involvement in the design and implementation of integration activities.

→ **Expand community sponsorship:** Increasing the number of countries participating and slots available for community sponsorship, as well as the number and range of sponsors involved, would harness the power of networks to provide third-country solutions for more forced migrants. Sponsorship includes (but can also go beyond) resettlement to provide other migration pathways and support integration of those already in country.

→ **Tap into family ties:** The ability to name who is being sponsored (as in Canada's sponsorship programme) would allow a greater number of refugees to bring to the country more distant family members through community sponsorship programmes. Humanitarian admissions programmes that include a private sponsorship element and expanded eligibility for family reunification channels (e.g., age and type

of relatives) would also enable policymakers to tap into family networks in support of local integration and increased durable solutions in third countries.

→ **Grow co-housing initiatives:** Local governments and NGOs could tap into existing initiatives to match new arrivals with hosts – or launch new initiatives. This could entail making private rooms and apartments available for refugees, offering financial and/or technical support for hosts, or creating accommodation that intentionally houses both refugees and locals together under one roof. Efforts can also be made to improve interactions among residents of different backgrounds, such as the participatory consultation that TRAFIG researchers conducted in Athens, Greece with long-term residents and asylum seekers to improve cohabitation in apartment blocks funded by the ESTIA housing scheme.

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