MORE LOCAL IS POSSIBLE

Recommendations for enhancing local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in the Gambella refugee response

The Gambella region of western Ethiopia hosts over 300,000 South Sudanese refugees in seven camps. The refugee response is dominated by UN agencies and international NGOs and staffed mostly by Ethiopians from outside of Gambella, creating a gap between humanitarian actors and the people they seek to assist. In order to realize commitments to localization and refugee participation made in the Charter for Change, the Grand Bargain and the Global Compact for Refugees, it is critical for refugees and local populations to be more involved in shaping and leading the delivery of aid. This could be achieved through increasing the role played by Gambella-based NGOs, engaging with faith-based actors, facilitating diaspora initiatives and supporting the development of refugee-led organizations.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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Cover photo: Oxfam staff member meeting with refugee camp committee members, Nguenyyiel refugee camp, Gambella. Photo credit: Serawit Atnafu.

SUMMARY

Over the past decade, there has been a growing movement to increase the leadership of local actors in humanitarian response work. More recently, the goal of strengthening local humanitarian leadership has been integrated into global policy frameworks for responding to large refugee crises. The 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) clearly emphasize the importance of local civil society in refugee programming and also envisage a more prominent role for refugees themselves.

Ethiopia hosts almost 800,000 refugees, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa.¹ There are more than 362,000 South Sudanese refugees registered in Ethiopia – the largest group in the country.² Most South Sudanese refugees came to Ethiopia following the outbreak of violence in South Sudan in December 2013. The vast majority of them (335,428) reside in the Gambella region.

Though Ethiopia has been at the forefront of implementing the GCR and the CRRF, there is a gap between humanitarian actors in Gambella and the people they seek to assist. Indeed, most stakeholders associated with the Gambella refugee response would agree that it is not ‘as local as possible.’ UN agencies and international NGOs dominate aid delivery, and most Ethiopians who work in or supply the refugee operation are from outside the Gambella region. While there are a few national Ethiopian organizations that participate in the response, Gambella-based or refugee-led organizations are completely absent.³

For Ethiopia’s Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS),⁴ UN agencies and NGOs operating in Gambella, refugee participation is primarily realized through engagements with refugee administrative structures, participatory assessment processes, thematic refugee committees and associations, and employment of refugees as ‘incentive workers.’ These current approaches generally limit refugees’ participation to the technical execution of projects or governance of life in the camps and should be reviewed to ensure refugees can, more genuinely, influence the design of programmes and lead their implementation.

UN agencies and international NGOs should also work to engage with other forms of political organization, community protection and self-help that operate in parallel with the refugee response. Churches and faith-based initiatives play a significant role in supporting community solidarity and should be given more attention by humanitarian actors. Humanitarian actors should also develop strategies to encourage and facilitate remittances and transnational support networks, which are a critical means of self-help for refugees. Gambella-based civil society organizations also offer an important avenue for localizing refugee operations, and increasing their engagement could help close the gap between aid organizations and refugees. Humanitarian actors should also explore partnership with refugee self-help groups and support the formalization of refugee-led organizations.

This report is based on qualitative research conducted in Gambella between December 2020 and January 2021. It proposes feasible and concrete ideas for

enhancing the role of refugees and local populations in shaping and leading the delivery of aid. Oxfam is committed to drawing on its recommendations to shift its own ways of working. We hope that it triggers critical self-reflection and action among all stakeholders within the Gambella refugee response.

1 INTRODUCTION

COMMITMENTS TO LOCALIZATION AND REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

The gap that too often exists between relief agencies and those affected by humanitarian crises is well documented in the scholarship on humanitarianism and development aid.⁵ Over the past decade, however, there has been a growing aspiration to address this gap by increasing the leadership of local actors (at sub-national and national levels) in humanitarian response work. The arguments in favour of this are clear: local actors are already in the affected areas, know the context, have better access and can often operate faster and more cost-effectively. This movement in favour of more localized humanitarian responses has crystalized in a set of global commitments by donors and international organizations, including Oxfam, such as the Charter for Change and the Grand Bargain.⁶

More recently, the goal of strengthening local humanitarian leadership has been integrated into global policy frameworks for responding to large refugee crises. The 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) clearly emphasize the importance of local civil society in refugee programming and envisage a more prominent role for refugees themselves. The GCR notes that interventions 'are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.'⁷

In preparation for the first ever Global Refugee Forum in 2019, UNHCR sought to engage with various refugee-led groups.⁸ During the event, the Global Refugee-led Network (a group of refugee-led organizations) proposed a pledge 'to support the meaningful participation of refugees and host communities in decisions that affect their lives,' which was supported by several international NGOs (INGOs), including Oxfam.⁹

But practice has lagged behind these commitments, and localization as well as refugee participation are, in many displacement contexts, no more than a vague aspiration.¹⁰ The aid industry remains hierarchical and structured by 'top-down' interventions, with those actually affected by aid still not adequately involved in planning and decision making.

The gap between humanitarian actors in Gambella, Ethiopia and the people they seek to assist is this report's point of departure. The report's objective is to explore how this gap might be bridged and to propose feasible and concrete ideas for enhancing the role of refugees and local populations in shaping the way aid is delivered. Oxfam is committed to drawing on this report to shift its own ways of working and we hope its recommendations will influence other stakeholders within the Gambella refugee response.

Localization: The ‘process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, each in their own way, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action, while still ensuring humanitarian needs can be met swiftly, effectively and in a principled manner.’¹¹

Local humanitarian leadership: Understood by Oxfam as ‘local humanitarian actors (whether civil society, government or both) leading humanitarian response and ensuring it is fast and appropriate and meeting the needs of the affected population.’ LHL refers to a transformed humanitarian system: one which is collaborative, inclusive, agile and diverse in nature, and where aid decision-making processes are equitable and closer to affected people.¹²

Participation: The *Manual on a Community Based Approach in UNHCR Operations* from 2008 defines participation as ‘the full and equal involvement of all members of the community in decision-making processes and activities that affect their lives, in both public and private spheres.’ This means that refugees are not simply informed about decisions that impact them but are consulted, with their views then being taken into account. It also means that the voices of those who might be marginalized within a certain society – children, women, certain minorities or persons with disabilities, for example – are actively sought. The Manual frames participation as a right whose realization promotes protection and empowers refugees. ‘Through effective participation, the community can support its own self-initiated activities to meet its preferred goals.’¹³

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on qualitative research conducted in Gambella between December 2020 and January 2021, by a team of five researchers – three Ethiopians from Gambella and two foreigners with significant research experience in the region.

Research was conducted in Gambella town and Itang *woreda*,¹⁴ where the team worked in Nguenyiel refugee camp, Tharpam area and Achwa and Itang Kir *kebelles*. Interviews and small group discussions were conducted with a wide range of actors: Ethiopian and INGO employees, UN and government officials, civil society actors, church leaders, and refugees and citizens, including business owners, youth, women and elders, and members of the refugee administration and Refugee Central Committee (RCC) in the camps. Within the refugee camp, some interviewees were identified and mobilized by Oxfam’s staff and incentive workers, while others were selected randomly by the research team, from different zones. Interviewees from international and local NGOs as well as government institutions were identified through existing networks of the research team and Oxfam’s staff. Research in Gambella was supplemented by a small number of interviews with NGO employees and UN officials in Addis Ababa and phone interviews with leaders of Nuer diaspora groups in the UK and the US.

Interviews were conducted in Nuer, Anywaa and English. They were anonymized and were not audio-recorded to allow participants to speak freely. Interviewees were briefed about the purpose of the research and gave their consent for participation orally. In total, researchers conducted 47 individual interviews and 30 group discussions with two to eight respondents each. Researchers conducted interviews either independently or in pairs. In addition to interviews

and group discussions, the team also collected popular songs composed by women and children in Nguenyiel camp and attended religious conferences and community events.

ETHIOPIA'S REFUGEE POLICY FRAMEWORK

Ethiopia has been at the forefront of implementation of the GCR and the associated CRRF. Prominent in its approach has been a focus on fostering refugee self-reliance by increasing the entitlements available to refugees in order to reduce their dependence on external aid. In parallel there has been a focus on ensuring more equitable distribution of resources between refugees and host communities.¹⁵

A 'roadmap' for the implementation of the CRRF in Ethiopia was introduced by the government in 2017.¹⁶ In 2019, the Government of Ethiopia adopted new legislation to direct the shift in policy.¹⁷ The legislation creates greater space for refugees to take on formal employment and have freedom of movement outside the camps, under certain conditions, and provides them with a range of additional rights. A range of projects has been launched to support this policy shift, with a strong emphasis on promoting refugee livelihoods and more integrated service delivery.¹⁸

Ethiopia's national policy documents also incorporate commitments to localization and refugee participation. The national CRRF roadmap echoes the GCR and CRRF vision of a 'multi-stakeholder approach' involving 'private-sector organizations and foundations, international and national NGOs, civil society, media, academia, **refugees and host communities** and other stakeholders.'¹⁹

The National Community-Based Protection Strategy that RRS and UNHCR published in 2018 highlights the importance of accountability towards affected populations. The strategy holds that programming should be 'informed by the priorities, needs, capacities and views of persons of concern' and that there should be 'mechanisms through which affected populations may provide feedback about the adequacy of interventions by addressing concerns or making complaints.' To promote this end, the strategy holds that 'the participation and inclusion of refugees in the different stages of the programme cycle' should be ensured.²⁰

Nguenyiel refugee camp, Gambella. © Serawit Atnafu/Oxfam in Ethiopia.

THE REFUGEE RESPONSE IN GAMBELLA

Ethiopia is one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa, with almost 800,000 refugees.²¹ There are more than 362,000 South Sudanese refugees registered in Ethiopia – the largest group in the country.²² Most South Sudanese refugees came to Ethiopia following the outbreak of violence in South Sudan in December 2013. The vast majority of them (335,428) reside in Gambella region, though some (22,222) have also been relocated to Benishangul-Gumuz. Refugees in Gambella are hosted in seven camps: Kule, Tierkidi and Nguenyiel (also known locally as Kule 1, 2 and 3, respectively) in Itang special woreda; Pingudo 1 and 2 camps in Gog woreda; Jewi camp in Gambella woreda; and Ukugo in Dima woreda.

Pingudo, which opened in 1993, is the oldest camp in Gambella. All other camps have opened since 2014, though they were established in areas that had hosted refugees in the past. Nguenyiel, the youngest camp, opened in late 2016. Most South Sudanese refugees in Gambella are Nuer, primarily Eastern Jikāny and Lou from South Sudan's Upper Nile and Jonglei states, respectively.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the refugee situation on life in Gambella and on the region's political dynamics. Precise data on the size of Gambella's population today does not exist, but 2013 population projections suggested that by mid-2017 it would be 435,135.²³ Refugees, therefore, represent a significant portion of the region's population, and it is often said that there are roughly as many refugees in the region as there are citizens.

Gambella is a peripheral lowland region in western Ethiopia. Nuer, Anywaa (sometimes spelled 'Anuak') and the much smaller Majang, Opo and Komo

communities are considered 'Indigenous' to Gambella and are granted specific entitlements by the regional constitution.²⁴ However, individuals from other parts of Ethiopia – known locally as *buny* in Nuer or *gääla* in Anywaa – have also migrated into the region in large numbers, particularly since the 1970s, and play a central role in its economy and the civil service.

LOCATING 'THE LOCAL'

The principle of localization, as formulated by the UN Secretary General, is that aid delivery should be 'as local as possible, as international as necessary.'²⁵ Indeed, 'localness' exists on a spectrum and is not a binary concept. With affected communities themselves at the centre, degrees of 'localness' can be impacted by geographic proximity, levels of shared trust, understanding, experience, ethnic identity and nationality.

What is clear in Gambella is that the refugee response is not 'as local as possible.' It is dominated by UN agencies and INGOs, and according to a recent ODI study, Ethiopians from outside Gambella also 'form the majority of the staffing and suppliers of the refugee operation.'²⁶ While there are a few national Ethiopian organizations that participate in the response, Gambella-based or refugee-led organizations are completely absent. The fact that the majority of people making day-to-day decisions about the delivery of aid and employed in the aid operation in Gambella are not from the region contributes to creating distance between the refugee operation, refugees and civilians in Gambella.

In addition to increasing the engagement and participation of refugees themselves, the refugee response should engage more with communities from and living in Gambella. They should be involved in the response not only because they form the host community, but also because, given the particular dynamics of Gambella, they often have very close ties with the refugees. Gambella's main 'Indigenous' groups straddle the Ethiopian-South Sudanese borderlands, and 'ethnic' identity, for many people in Gambella, precedes national identity. Among Nuer, for example, both sides of the Ethiopian-South Sudanese border are considered to be part of 'Nuerland' (rooq_Nuärä). Cross-border movement that takes place below the legal radar is common. Dual nationality is also common, and there is considerable movement in and out of the camps. This blurs the delineation between 'refugees' and 'citizens' as well as between 'refugees' and 'host community members' in Gambella.

Given all this, if more Nuer and Anywaa from the Gambella host community were engaged in the refugee response – either through organizations they lead or as employees of aid agencies, it would be easier for these agencies to understand the perspectives of the people they are working to support. Greater overlap in culture and language between agencies and refugees would make efforts to involve and consult refugees more effective. In Gambella, localization and refugee participation are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

But shifting power over the refugee response is complicated by its economic and political implications. The economic impact of the refugee operation on the region's economy is significant. In 2017, for example, UNHCR's expenditure in the Gambella operation was \$52m – more than twice the estimated total expenditure of all Gambella's woredas combined in the same year.²⁷ The refugee response,

supplemented by a range of development initiatives targeting host communities, has considerable economic weight in this otherwise impoverished region. Indeed, participation in the refugee operation is one of the key sources of livelihoods in the region; shifting who benefits will come with challenges.

Promoting a greater role for refugees in Gambella also needs to be considered in relation to inter-ethnic dynamics between Nuer and Anywaa, the two largest 'Indigenous' groups.²⁸ As the South Sudanese refugees are predominantly Nuer, the refugee influx has impacted the ethnic composition of Gambella, with Nuer overtaking Anywaa as the region's largest group. This trend has been the source of considerable concern among Anywaa, who feel that their traditional homelands and the region's resources have increasingly been taken over.²⁹

Unsurprisingly, some Anywaa watched with anxiety the announcements regarding Ethiopia's implementation of the CRRF, fearing that more freedoms and opportunities for refugees will mean further marginalization for them. RRS, well aware of the grievances around the distribution of refugee assistance in under-resourced areas, has long had a policy in place according to which a proportion of NGO projects under their authority has to be allocated to projects among 'host communities' (known as the '70/30' policy), and refugee-hosting areas of Gambella have also benefited from several development projects in recent years, in parallel with the development of the CRRF.³⁰ Local concerns about the potential impact of the CRRF have now waned, as local actors have come to realize that they stand to benefit from the process too.³¹

2 CURRENT EFFORTS AT REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

For RRS, UN agencies and NGOs operating in Gambella, refugee participation is primarily realized through engagements with refugee administrative structures in the camps. Participatory assessments also provide an opportunity for refugees to communicate their needs and priorities, and thereby inform humanitarian programming. Some organizations have established thematic refugee committees and associations to support their outreach initiatives and service provision efforts. Employment as ‘incentive workers’ also brings refugees into the daily refugee operations and creates another framework for their participation.

But these engagements primarily take place through mechanisms introduced by the Ethiopian government or international organizations, and limit refugees’ participation to administrative aspects of the refugee operation – to the technical execution of projects or governance of life in the camps, rather than the planning or design of interventions. The current approach is therefore more geared towards the smooth implementation of policies and projects conceived by external humanitarian actors than to the creation of avenues for real dialogue. The current approaches should be reviewed to ensure refugees can, more genuinely, influence the design of programmes and lead their implementation.

ENGAGEMENT WITH REFUGEE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES

The refugee population in each of Gambella’s camps is governed by an elaborate administrative structure with considerable executive, legislative and judicial powers. At the bottom of this structure is the ‘community’ – a cluster of about 16 households. Above the community is the ‘block’, and above it, the ‘zone’. Above all zones, responsible for representing the refugee community in each camp, is the RCC, with representatives responsible for various issues: health, security, education, youth and sport, food and shelter, women’s affairs, and so on. Each of the lower levels of this administrative hierarchy – community, block and zone – also has its leaders. The RCC and the entire refugee administration are nominally elected by refugees every two years. Although election processes vary between camps, RRS generally has some influence over their outcomes, and the authority to directly appoint some of the RCC members.

These refugee-led structures play an important role in maintaining law and order in the camps.³² Any type of activity that involves assemblies of people that could have security implications – marriage celebrations, graduation parties, church conferences – is reported in advance to zone leaders, and any business or church operating in the camp is approved by the zone administration. During food distribution – which is often hectic, according to the description of many female refugees – it is the role of the *shurta* (the refugee ‘police’ attached to the administration) to control the crowd. One of the most critical functions of the

refugee administration is also the application of Nuer customary law, and it is to these leaders that refugees turn for arbitration when conflicts arise in the camp.

Refugees describe their leaders in the camp as mediators or intermediaries situated between 'the people' and 'the government.' The refugees who hold positions in the camp's refugee administration are often chosen to serve in these roles because of their familiarity with the 'work of the government' (*lät kumε*), having lived in an urban area in South Sudan, held a government position or worked for an NGO. Refugees value them for their ability to negotiate with RRS and NGOs and broker resources and protection.

Oxfam staff member meeting with refugees in Nguenyiil refugee camp, Gambella. © Serawit Atnafu/Oxfam in Ethiopia.

Indeed, the RCCs are the critical point of interaction between the aid operation and ordinary people in the camps. For NGOs, UN agencies and the Ethiopian government, camp leaders represent 'the refugee community' and are the key entry point for engaging with it. External partners indicated these structures made 'engaging the community' more straightforward than outside the camps, where different local authorities can be difficult to navigate.³³ UNHCR, RRS and NGOs value them for their ability to support operations and facilitate the execution of projects.

Respondents from aid agencies indicated that their experiences working with RCCs in Gambella were generally positive, and that RCC representatives held valuable insights about daily life in the camps that should be shaping programmes.³⁴ One organization cited an instance when they had brought RCC representatives together in Gambella town to discuss their programming on sexual and gender-based violence and received critique that had helped them shape future activities.³⁵ While RCCs are not straightforwardly 'representative' of

refugees' perspectives, nor wholly accountable to them, they do have a legitimate and important role as a bridging institution.

But too often, aid agencies engage with RCCs more as a matter of course than because their input and views are actually valued. There should be more efforts to engage them –and the hierarchy of governance bodies that sits underneath them –in ongoing, strategic discussions about the direction of projects being implemented.

One major shortcoming in using the refugee administrative structures as a primary intermediary for all refugees is that they are dominated by men. This is despite the fact that the majority of refugees in Gambella are women and children. RRS, UNHCR and INGOs in Gambella acknowledge the problem and have expressed their interest in enhancing the participation of women. Formally, there are a few positions secured for women in the RCC of each camp. However, it is unclear to what extent this allows women to be meaningfully represented and heard. Interviews and group discussions in Nguenyiel camp, for instance, indicate that many women, even if they are generally aware of the fact that there is a woman representative in charge of 'women's affairs' in the RCC, do not know who she is and what she does, and do not perceive her as an avenue for raising their concerns with the authorities.³⁶

The absence of women from leadership positions within the refugee administration echoes similar gender dynamics both within the refugee community and the humanitarian sector and government institutions. The experience and skills one needs in order to serve as a useful intermediary between refugees and humanitarian agencies – including knowledge of English and literacy – make it exceptionally difficult for most women to penetrate this world, as their access to formal education is more limited in the first place. In the same vein, the fact that camp governance structures as a whole are highly gendered, and most humanitarian agencies are themselves dominated by men (and usually by non-Nuer speakers), also deters women's participation.

To overcome these challenges, RRS, UNHCR and implementing partners should develop strategies to strengthen the participation of women in the RCCs. This should include making sure that women from different refugee communities are adequately and consistently represented in these structures, and that they have the platform, and are given the opportunity, to raise their concerns and influence programming. Mentoring initiatives could support women refugees to fulfil leadership roles. With adequate support, they could also meaningfully reach out to women in the camp and be seen as a viable avenue for raising concerns.

Another challenge with refugee governance structures is that, though formally apolitical, they are prone to power competitions between different Nuer communities, with different sections (often referred to as 'tribes' or 'clans') seeking to secure a fair share of seats in the administration. UNHCR and RRS are generally aware of these dynamics, and have introduced policies to address them, such as a rotation system between Lou and Eastern Jikany Nuer for the position of RCC Chair in some camps. But these agencies and other partners should make a greater effort to understand the political dynamics underlying local governance structures, so they know the limitations of RCC representation and make sure their interventions and engagements are conflict-sensitive.

PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENTS

Assessments and surveys are another mechanism used by humanitarian actors in Gambella to give refugees an opportunity to influence policies and programmes. Every year, UNHCR and RRS, in cooperation with NGOs operating in the region, organize a participatory assessment (PA) process that represents their efforts 'to develop partnerships with refugees of all ages and backgrounds and to promote their meaningful participation through structured dialogue.'³⁷ As part of the PA, group discussions are conducted with women, men, girls, boys and people with specific needs and disabilities. Members of the refugee administrations in the camps help identify participants for these discussions, according to the categories and timetable provided to them.

Though the PA process is meant to inform the planning of interventions and programmes, actors at all levels, including within RRS and the UN, acknowledge that responding to the concerns raised by refugees in this process of assessment has consistently been a challenge, to a great extent due to lack of funding. A senior RRS official in Gambella, for example, noted that the gap between the needs and the ability to respond to them only increases every year.³⁸

That different NGOs conduct separate assessments, and that refugee participants are identified on an ad hoc basis for each exercise, mean that such processes can be fragmented, that follow-up is a challenge or an entirely missing component, and that refugees are not always fully aware of who they have spoken to and for what purpose. The implication is that while they are indeed consulted, in most cases no feedback is provided to them and neither do they see the impact of their input.³⁹ Ultimately, this reduces people's interest in participating in such exercises, which can appear rather futile.

Humanitarian agencies and RRS should proactively involve refugees in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of programmes in Gambella. During PA processes, refugees and host communities should be able to engage with confidence and trust that their views will impact planning. NGOs should improve coordination to avoid repetitive or fragmented assessments and to ensure that assessments build on lessons and observations of past years. There must be proper post-assessment engagement to feed back on the overall outcomes of the assessment. Proposed actions and responses to assessment outcomes should be planned jointly with refugees and host communities, so they are given a say in how available resources are used. The process should provide space for reflection on how previous feedback has been responded to.

Oxfam staff member meeting with women in Nguenyiel refugee camp. © Serawit Atnafu/Oxfam in Uganda.

COMMUNITY GROUPS, ASSOCIATIONS AND COMMITTEES

In addition to the refugee-led administrative structure that governs life in the camps, there are various community groups and associations, usually initiated by humanitarian actors, that support their mobilization efforts and the provision of services in the camp. Oxfam works with a water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) committee in Nguenyiel; Help Age coordinates an elder association; Humanity & Inclusion (HI) works with an association of persons with disabilities; International Medical Corps (IMC) has a women's group network; and Plan International organizes youth groups. Such initiatives, as with any other form of communal activity in the camp, have the general approval of the RCC and RRS, but they are not formal, licensed organizations.

Although engagement with these groups enhances refugee participation in the operations of NGOs, their ultimate end is supporting the execution of projects conceived by the respective NGOs. Perhaps for this reason, the sustainability of such initiatives is a major concern among humanitarian agencies, with 'ownership' recognized as a problem. Lack of coordination between NGOs means that there can be duplication in training programmes and the introduction of new community-based groups.⁴⁰ The fact that interventions are generally short term (UNHCR projects are still managed on an annual basis), and that refugees tend to be highly mobile (moving both in and out of refugee camps and across the border) means that consistent engagement can be a challenge. Refugees may attend a workshop or participate in the training programme, but later disappear.⁴¹ As one

humanitarian explained: ‘When you conduct a training or during distribution of food or non-food items, you find them there. For any community engagement activity, later, you cannot find them.’⁴²

INCENTIVE WORKERS

In the daily operations of NGOs in the camp, incentive workers are another important bridge between international or Ethiopian employees, many of whom do not speak Nuer and have limited knowledge of the camp dynamics and the refugee population. This sort of involvement in humanitarian work promotes participation, in the sense that it brings refugees into the world of NGOs and makes it easier for organizations to engage with refugee communities.

But incentive work, too, is primarily a form of inclusion that is based on co-optation, as the impact of incentive workers on shaping their roles and duties seems to be, in most cases, limited or non-existent. Incentive workers, who are paid at fixed rates of 800–920 Ethiopian birr (\$20–23) per month, are inevitably at the bottom of the employment hierarchy in the organizations they work with. They therefore have limited influence over the design or development of programming.

EFFORTS AT MORE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Some NGOs have sought to push existing approaches on refugee participation and leadership a step forward, attempting to establish more sustainable forms of refugee-led organization that also give refugees a greater degree of control over humanitarian interventions.

As part of a recent project designed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Oxfam supported three refugee-led groups in Nguenyiyiel camp (Oxfam’s own refugee-led WASH Management Committee, the RCC, and a self-help group of persons with disabilities and their caregivers, associated with Humanity & Inclusion) to come up with their own proposed activities. The groups were asked to participate in training and were then given awareness-raising materials for COVID-19 and other equipment, according to their own requests, in order to facilitate their independent operation. This equipment included bicycles to move around the camp, amplifiers and megaphones.

Oxfam WASH committee members in Nguenyiel refugee camp. © Serawit Atnafu/Oxfam in Ethiopia.

Another initiative that can be mentioned in this context is the waste management cooperative that was initiated by Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in Jewi camp in 2019, which was designed to encourage waste recycling. This cooperative – after its members were verified as refugees by UNHCR and granted a formal letter from RRS – was able to register with the authorities in Gambella as a legal entity and open a bank account. According to NCA, this was made possible due to the passing of Ethiopia’s new Refugee Proclamation, which allows refugees to engage ‘individually or in group’ in micro-enterprise. Thus, the group registered as a cooperative, not a non-profit civil society organization (CSO), since its purpose was to collect plastic waste in order to sell it for recycling.⁴³ While in Jewi the cooperative remained under the supervision of RRS, in Gambella town, the execution of the same project was facilitated by Mekane Yesus Church (see below), which sought to work with a pre-existing waste management cooperative originally established by Seventh-day Adventist youth.⁴⁴

These efforts are important and need to be replicated. NGOs should continue developing strategies that support refugee self-organization beyond NGO-initiated and convened groups. These self-organized structures are key to enhancing sustained self-help and self-reliance.

3 OTHER AVENUES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Beyond the refugee administrative structures and the refugee groups and committees introduced by humanitarian agencies to support execution of projects, there are other forms of political organization, community protection and self-help that operate in parallel with the refugee response.

Churches and faith-based initiatives play a significant role in supporting community solidarity and should be given more attention by humanitarian actors. Gambella-based CSOs, which are virtually absent from the refugee response, also offer an important avenue for localizing refugee operations and could support closing the gap between aid organizations and refugees. Transnational support networks of South Sudanese around the world are critical means of self-help for refugees; humanitarian actors should explore ways to encourage and engage them, to leverage their potential for assisting populations in Gambella.

While recent legislation in Ethiopia may have opened up new avenues for refugees to associate, the structures through which Nuer communities and refugees organize do not currently conform to conventional taxonomies of CSOs. Refugees lead various religious and community associations in the camps, but there are no formally registered refugee-led organizations that work with NGOs as part of Gambella's refugee response. Humanitarian actors should explore partnership with self-initiated groups and help explore the opportunity for formalization of refugee-led organizations.

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Churches play an important role in communal life inside and outside refugee camps in Gambella. Churches operating in the camp need the approval of the refugee administration, but they have few links with humanitarian agencies. Nonetheless, for many people they remain the most trustworthy forums of social activity and communal support, and they connect refugees in the camps not only with each other but with Nuer communities across the region and the world. Though their level of bureaucratization is often basic, and their structures are decentralized, they are stable institutions to which members are highly committed.

The religious landscape in Gambella is dense. Most Nuer churches are Evangelical Protestant. Presbyterian and Seventh-day Adventist churches are dominant, but since the 1990s, a huge number of new Evangelical churches have been established in the region. Another important religious movement in the camps is the 'Ngundeng Church', whose members follow the teachings of the late Nuer prophet Ngundeng Bong (who died in 1906). The church, which originally took form as an organized institution in Gambella's refugee camps in the 1990s, has congregations across the region.⁴⁵

The larger religious movements have several congregations in each camp. The churches in the camps retain affiliation with their mother churches in South Sudan; they also cooperate with their respective Ethiopian branches and are integrated into wider networks of churches in the region. This enables a strong sense of continuity and cohesion across communities that are otherwise fragmented and dispersed and whose members are highly mobile. Many Nuer churches also cooperate and organize events under large ecumenical organizations that operate across 'Nuerland' and among diaspora communities. These include the Nuer Christian Mission Network (formerly NCC, Nuer Council of Churches) and Nuer Christian Youth for Peace and Development (popularly known as 'Youth Malä'). Youth Malä events, in particular, are extremely popular among young people across the region.

Church service in Nguenyiyel refugee camp, Gambella. © Serawit Atnafu/Oxfam in Ethiopia.

Gambella's churches should matter to humanitarian actors because they play a significant role in driving community solidarity. Members participate in communal efforts such as the construction of buildings or outreach activities funded through tithes and offerings (donations). Churches outside the camps, particularly those with foreign donors, occasionally support congregations of refugees in church development activities (by providing Bibles, musical instruments, construction materials or funds for new churches) and with small humanitarian donations (clothes, blankets, mosquito nets and the like).

The Church of the Nazarene, for example, an American Evangelical church with branches across the world, extends some support to its members in Gambella through the church's relief agency, Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, and through a new charity called African Relief Ministries (ARM). Set up by Nuer living in the US and American Evangelicals, ARM is dedicated to supporting Nuer in Gambella. Its initiatives include donations of clothes and food, a micro-finance

programme that aims to help widows start small businesses, and pastoral training.⁴⁶

Humanitarian actors in Gambella should build a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the role that religious institutions play in the refugee and host community context, in order to support their positive contributions while mitigating potentially negative ones. Indeed, there are concerns about and risks to engaging local faith actors, such as their ability to adhere to the humanitarian principle of impartiality (prioritizing aid based on need alone and without respect to ethnicity or religion), and to promote gender equality. But local faith-based actors often have a long history of acting as social safety nets in their communities, command respect, and have the influence to effect social change in their communities (e.g. on gender equality, violence against women, early marriage). INGOs should more fully recognize, acknowledge and respect their capabilities and explore their potential in enhancing local humanitarian leadership.⁴⁷

Church leaders in Nguennyiel refugee camp, Gambella. © Serawit Atnafu/Oxfam in Ethiopia.

GAMBELLA'S CIVIL SOCIETY

There are few local CSOs operating in Gambella. Those that do exist struggle to secure funds from donors, have very limited links with the INGOs operating in the region and no involvement at all in the refugee response. Those Ethiopian NGOs that are involved in the refugee operation are national organizations with headquarters in Addis Ababa. When interviewees working for INGOs were asked about their relationship with local CSOs during the research for this paper, they usually replied that they were not aware of the existence of any.

The barriers to cooperation are not legal – it is now relatively simple, for Ethiopian citizens, to register an NGO with the government in Gambella. The main problem hindering local civil society is their generally low capacity: staff with limited experience; no stable core funding; little documentation of their past work; and weak financial and management systems. They struggle to meet requirements for external funding and, with limited experience, they also have limited credibility in the eyes of international groups or even national NGOs.

Part of the barrier is also a concern from external actors about the neutrality of local NGOs in an environment widely understood to be prone to identity-based conflict. Indeed, some of the more prominent local organizations are explicitly linked to political actors and agendas, as elsewhere in Ethiopia. The Nuer Development Association and Ethiopian Anywaa Development Association, for example, were established about two decades ago, following the model of such associations in other parts of Ethiopia, and at times have been caught up in local political controversies. Their initiatives target their respective communities in Gambella's Nuer and Anywaa zones. Local Nuer and Anywaa politicians and government employees are closely involved in their leadership and fund them through membership fees, which were previously mandatory.⁴⁸ For instance, the current President of Gambella, Omod Ojulu, is the chair of the board of the Anywaa Development Association.⁴⁹

Such organizations are only one part of Gambella's civil society landscape. But the challenges encountered by Dit Ni Tek, an organization founded in 2016 by a group of Nuer citizens, perhaps explain why this landscape is not particularly crowded.⁵⁰ Its ambitions are to be able to take on service delivery contracts like other NGOs in the region, even if on a smaller scale. It has organized small-scale activities in Gambella town using its own members' resources: awareness-raising on HIV, sanitation and other health practices, and procuring water tanks for handwashing after the COVID-19 crisis began. But it has been unable to convince any external partners that it is a credible implementation partner, despite outreach in both Gambella and Addis Ababa. The organization is trapped: it lacks the capacities and credibility to secure funds but is also unable to develop its capacities or increase its credibility precisely because it lacks funds and has no partners.

But even those local NGOs that have been more successful in forging partnerships and securing funding for projects remain largely disconnected from INGOs operating in Gambella. The Gambella Children and Community Development Organization (GCCDO), for example, established in 2008, has been able to forge partnerships with some international groups with offices in Addis Ababa in the past, and secured funding from several international donors for projects related to access to education, health and environmental conservation. However, GCCDO has developed no links with any INGO operating in Gambella. Its most significant partner and funder has so far been Addis Ababa University, which contracted GCCDO to serve as an implementing partner in several wildlife conservation projects. It also received a grant under the British Council's Civil Society Support Project (CSSP), one of the few projects in Ethiopia focused primarily on civil society development.

The gap between local civil society and INGOs involved in the refugee operation is reinforced by bureaucratic separation. While interventions in the refugee camps are approved and monitored by RRS and executed through engagement with the refugee administration in the camp, the operations of NGOs among civilians are

approved and monitored by the Agency for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO) and executed through engagement with woreda and kebele administrations in the region. ACSO is a new federal agency which was established under Ethiopia's 2019 Organizations of Civil Societies Proclamation 2019, and replaced the Charities and Societies Agency.⁵¹ The implication is that those organizations working primarily in the camps in Gambella have limited interaction with local government structures, which they experience as less responsive and efficient.⁵² Moreover, there is a misalignment in the different hierarchies of operations inside and outside the refugee camps: RRS requires organizations that seek to work in the camps to engage initially through Addis Ababa, which is far more difficult for local organizations than it is for international or national ones, who maintain offices in the capital.

Thus, collaborations that bridge the two worlds are rare. The Development and Social Services Commission of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY-DASSC) is one of the only civil society groups in Gambella that has developed any partnership with INGOs operating in the region. It works with NCA among host communities in Gambella town. While DASSC is associated with Mekane Yesus at the national level, it operates in Gambella through the church's local branch offices – the East and West Gambella Bethel Synods, responsible for Gambella's Anywaa and Nuer congregations, respectively. Historically, Mekane Yesus emerged out of Presbyterian missionary churches and is the largest and oldest church in Gambella. DASSC does not operate in Gambella's refugee camps and has no relationship with RRS, but since 2018, it has been supporting kebelles in Itang and Gog woredas, where refugees have settled among civilians, as part of its Gambella Region Anuak and Nuer Development project (GRAND). Funded by the Protestant German development agency Bread for the World, GRAND aims to promote food security and prevent conflicts over natural resources in areas impacted by the arrival of refugees.⁵³

There is a considerable gap in support for civil society development in Gambella. As a result, CSOs struggle to articulate their objectives or organize themselves in ways that make it easy for international actors to fund them. There should be efforts to promote civil society development in Gambella and pave the way for more engagement between local organizations, INGOs and donors. The lack of such efforts is a significant gap that will hamper any attempts to enhance local humanitarian and refugee leadership. Support for Gambellan civil society is also critical from a conflict sensitivity perspective, because it could benefit Anywaa and other groups from the region, regardless of whether there is significant scope for them to work in the camps.

REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS

In theory, Ethiopia's 2019 Refugee Proclamation has created the legal space for refugees to establish their own organizations, stating that refugees 'have the right to association, as regards non-political and non-profit making associations and trade unions in the same circumstance as the most favourable treatment accorded to foreign nationals pursuant to relevant laws' (Article 27). In practice, the entitlements of foreign nationals in this respect have been extremely limited since the passing of the 2009 Proclamation of Charities and Societies,⁵⁴ but this has also recently been opened up by the 2019 Organizations of Civil Societies

Proclamation. The new proclamation stipulates that an organization can be formed by 'Ethiopians, foreigner residents in Ethiopia or both' (Article 2.2), so in principle, it creates significant opportunities for refugee-led organizations.⁵⁵

In practice, this legal framework is yet to be fully rolled out to the regions, and it is notable that UNHCR staff, when asked about this recent legislation, suggested that until specific guidance is provided by RRS on how it should be interpreted there is no scope for doing more.⁵⁶ Indeed, beyond committees and groups initiated by NGOs, the research team did not come across any refugee-led organizations that have established formal ties with actors in Gambella's refugee response. This is not, of course, because refugees do not organize, but because this form of organization tends to remain informal, as it is generally understood within Gambella that foreigners do not have the right to establish CSOs in Ethiopia.

For example, the pan-Nuer organization BNFA (an acronym of 'Bentiu, Nasir, Fangak and Akobo,' which stand for the four main areas inhabited by Nuer in South Sudan) has representatives in Gambella's refugee camps. BNFA is a decentralized transnational movement with representatives in Nuer communities in multiple locations across North East Africa and is primarily concerned with advocating for Nuer unity and community development. In the camps, it organizes occasional community events and, according to its representatives, education programmes. However, it is not a formal, registered organization, and has no relationship with NGOs in the camp. 'Organizations belong to Ethiopians, and we, we are South Sudanese', the organization's representatives in Nguenyiel explained. 'It cannot happen that it could be registered in this place.'⁵⁷ Like BNFA, the various associations that represent smaller sections of Nuer society – though they have significant influence on the politics of the camps and the composition of the RCC – are informal organizations.

While the legal position in relation to refugee-led organizations should be increasingly enabling, it remains unclear how far aid agencies working with refugees are willing to go without further clarification. RRS should clarify the implications of the new law so that refugees can take advantage of any new opportunity to formally register organizations. Partners should support them to do so through funding and support for organizational development.

THE ROLE OF THE DIASPORA

Gambella region, and in particular Gambella town, is a global hub connecting communities from South Sudan with relatives across East Africa, North America and Australia. Many South Sudanese refugees have been resettled by the UN since the 1990s in the USA, Canada and Australia, and the support they send back plays a central role in various aspects of life in Gambella.⁵⁸

Individual remittances from family members in the diaspora are an important component of some refugees' livelihoods. This support often enables movement out of camps in Gambella and is commonly used to fund the construction of homes, education and sometimes even the opening of small businesses. On a wider community level, associations in the diaspora channel support to those in need through fluid community networks. Their support focuses on the organization of community events and on addressing specific emergencies through ad hoc donations.

Associations in the diaspora commonly unite certain sections of Nuer society – for example, all Lou or all Eastern Jikāny in a certain country, or all members of smaller sections of any of these groups – though they usually also cooperate under pan-Nuer umbrella organizations. In countries that are home to a small Nuer community (such as the UK), there may be only one association uniting all sections and no sub-groups.⁵⁹ While some community organizations are registered in the countries in which they operate, many, especially those representing smaller Nuer communities, are not. Their focus is usually on enhancing the welfare of communities in the diaspora while also extending support to those in need back in Ethiopia or South Sudan. There currently appear to be no links between diaspora groups and the refugee operation in Gambella.

In recent years, some community initiatives that fit the more conventional model of civil society and charity work have been formed by South Sudanese in the diaspora, but these have generally struggled to raise funds or make connections with NGOs working in Gambella. The experience of the NyaEden Foundation, established by former South Sudanese refugees living in the US, is an illuminating example. NyaEden's first project in Gambella was designed to promote menstrual health and hygiene among adolescent girls and women. NyaEden travelled to Gambella in order to distribute menstrual kits and hold menstrual health sessions in schools both in refugee and host communities. However, as outsiders who 'do not know the technicalities of NGOs', NyaEden's founders had difficulty gaining access to the refugee camps or persuading international organizations operating in Gambella to engage with them. They were able to gain permission from RRS to enter the camps – as individuals rather than as an organization – as they did not have the necessary paperwork for the latter. They then spent a day in Jewi camp, a visit made possible by World Vision, an NGO working on secondary education in the camp. Contacts in the government of Gambella and the Nuer Development Association facilitated visits to a local boarding school and a prison. These were all ad hoc initiatives, but NyaEden hopes to develop more long-term partnerships and projects.⁶⁰

While the South Sudanese diaspora may not be 'local' in the geographic sense, the transnational support it provides is a lifeline for populations in Gambella and is an important component of refugee livelihoods, a source of resilience and one of the primary paths to enhancing self-reliance. Given this, UNHCR and implementing partners should invest in understanding how to encourage community solidarity among these transnational networks. They should work with their offices in countries where Nuer and Anuak diaspora are most significant (particularly the US, Australia and Canada) to identify community initiatives and potential partners and explore how to integrate them into their programmes and activities.

4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenge of promoting greater local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in Gambella cannot be underestimated. Yet the Ethiopian government, donors, UN agencies and INGOs have all made commitments – through the Charter for Change, the Grand Bargain and the Global Compact for Refugees – to supporting a transformation of humanitarian systems that puts local actors at the forefront. Critical self-reflection by actors in the Gambella refugee response will trigger a range of new ideas and opportunities for building different and hopefully more empowering relationships that enable local actors to play a more prominent role. The recommendations below, if implemented, will offer an important starting point.

RETHINK ENGAGEMENT WITH THE REFUGEE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES

RRS, UNHCR AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS SHOULD:

- Draw on relevant national and international commitments under the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) framework to rearticulate the role of the RCCs and their subsidiary structures in the design, implementation and evaluation of aid projects in the camps and to ensure programmes are fully tailored to refugees' needs, well-being and aspirations.
- Support members of the refugee administration to carry out their responsibilities and effectively cooperate with humanitarian agencies, including by providing training in fields such as the rule of law, sexual and gender-based violence, and child protection.
- Consider specific innovations in engagement, such as:
 - organizing regular 'accountability sessions' in each camp, with the participation of both aid agencies and RCC members.
 - creating liaison roles within the RCCs tied to specific projects, to create formal links to key individuals.
 - establishing structures that bring together different RCC heads to discuss issues of shared concern with both aid actors and local authorities.
- Work to increase, strengthen and support the participation of women in the RCCs.

DEEPEN WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

- **Donors** should allocate resources to civil society development in Gambella, working closely with the regional government and the Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO).

- **RRS and UNHCR** should clarify the new legal position in relation to refugee-led organizations, issuing any supporting legislation that may be required. They should help refugees take advantage of the opportunities created by the new legislation and encourage partners to support the development of refugee-led organizations.
- **Implementing partners** should build partnerships with and deepen their understanding of religious and community associations in Gambella. They should look for opportunities to provide new forms of support that engage with existing structures and initiatives.
- **Implementing partners** should continue to innovate in supporting the establishment of refugee-led entities as part of their programming, while considering how such entities could benefit from, or build on, existing structures and CSOs. They should communicate the results of their initiatives widely, to help other organizations build on their experience.
- **RRS, UNHCR and implementing partners** should actively seek and encourage collaborations with local CSOs in Gambella.
- **UNHCR and implementing partners** should develop strategies for supporting transnational networks to assist populations in Gambella, and for helping leverage this support for longer-term impact.
- **RRS, UNHCR and implementing partners** should work to support women's humanitarian leadership. This should include identifying and engaging with women's groups; developing plans to build on their core strengths and constituencies; investing in capacity; promoting their full participation and leadership in humanitarian action, from planning to evaluation and lesson learning; and ensuring dedicated funding support for this.

REVIEW APPROACHES TO EMPLOYMENT

- **RRS, UNHCR, the regional government and implementing partners** should form a task force to explore options for increasing the employment opportunities for host community populations within the aid operation. Strategies could include, for example, an internship scheme to provide greater entry level opportunities, with clear pathways in place towards roles with greater responsibilities.
- **RRS and UNHCR and implementing partners** should review the latest legal frameworks to explore options for the formal employment of refugees themselves by aid agencies. This process should consider conflict sensitivity issues and produce specific guidance on ensuring that recruitment practices manage such issues carefully.
- **Implementing partners** in Gambella should review how and where they currently recruit for different positions, as far as possible ensuring that recruitment processes reach out to Nuer, Anywaa, Majang, Opo and Komo populations, whether they live in Gambella, Addis Ababa or outside Ethiopia.

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