

“Remuddling” Refugees: New Sources of Data and the Humanitarian Response

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What will refugee crises look like in 2050?

This brief thought-piece considers how emerging technologies and practices related to data are impacting how refugees are rendered visible as subjects of policy and humanitarian action. I will highlight three current trends related to the production of data, which are reshaping how we recognize refugee and refugee crises and the effects that we measure as significant. These trends include:

- Increased possibilities for big data on refugees.
- The emergence of evidence-based humanitarianism.
- Refugee crises as a challenge of economic development.

Undoubtedly these developments offer tremendous opportunity to expand our appreciation of the phenomenon of forced migration. More data, of better quality, and from more reliable sources promises to strengthen our analyses and the decisions based upon these. However, their effects are not limited to improved quality and understanding. Drawing on examples from my own work at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as well as recent observations of others, I argue that these trends may also enhance the depoliticization of the refugee predicament, the homogenization of the refugee experience and further marginalization what we might call “refugee voice”. I’ll conclude by suggesting that powerful advances in data technologies do not replace or negate the importance of small-scale qualitative studies that strive to centralize the refugee narrative. Rather, they underscore the urgency of their continued relevance.

Refugees and Big Data

The rise in big data has clearly transformed modern life, in ways that most of us are largely unaware. Our behaviors, movements and attitudes are tracked with increasing precision, leaving detailed data trails that can be fed into powerful algorithms to optimize specific outcomes. The ability to collect and analyze vast quantities of data enables not just powerful but also remarkably intimate insights that could not be achieved in a pre-digital age.

The potential for big data holds particular significance for refugees. Historically, refugees have been noted by their *invisibility* as a population.¹ Not too long ago, if you wanted to know something about refugees (at least in the developing world) you had to go to great lengths to find them. Refugee camps, were most refugees used to be settled, were in remote locations, purposefully isolated from the public gaze. Access was controlled by government authorities and refugee were kept in limbo (Malkki, 1995). Data that was collected on refugees was often partial, unreliable and not readily accessible to researchers. As Jeff Crisp (2018) notes, much has changed:

“The high level of current interest in refugee and migration data should come as no surprise. Innovations in the field of biometrics, the widespread use of digital devices, the popularity of social media and the penetration of internet services to the most remote parts of the world have all allowed information to be collected much faster, more systematically and at far less cost than was previously the case.” (Crisp, 2018)

Improved management of large administrative datasets on refugees has also enabled new possibilities for improved

¹ See the special issue of the Journal of Refugee Studies on “invisible displacement” (Polzer & Hammond, 2008).



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response. Recently, the IRC partnered with Stanford University’s Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) to develop a data-driven algorithm to improve decisions regarding the placement of arriving refugees across different resettlement locations. The algorithm leveraged the relationship between refugee background characteristics and site characteristics to optimize placement allocations with regard to employment outcomes at ninety days. Early findings from this ongoing study are promising, suggesting that employment outcomes could be improved by between 40% and 70%, relative to current placement practices (Bansak et al., 2018). These findings are preliminary, limited to employment as an outcome and have yet to be verified empirically. Nevertheless the study provides an interesting example of how large datasets, previously neglected, are now being put to work to inform more rigorous decision-making.

A number of humanitarian organizations, including the IRC, are also exploring the development of smartphone apps, designed to deliver information and services to improve opportunities for refugees. For example, the Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE)—a government-funded technical assistance program that provides cultural orientation services to refugees—recently launched an app called “Settle In”. This is described as a “helpful digital resource for refugees to use during their resettlement journey to the United States”.² Beyond the convenience, low cost and enhanced level of service offered to refugees by smartphone apps such as Settle In, one can imagine the potential data-points that could also be harvested and analyzed, to answer complex questions that may have nothing to do with the purpose or functioning of the app that generates the data. I don’t think this potential

is being realized yet, but it is likely to develop over time.

The Emergence of Evidence-Based Humanitarianism

Along with enhanced possibilities for generating more data on refugees, the humanitarian sector is becoming increasingly evidence-based. This is not a new trend, emerging from the early 2000s, in response to a growing debate over the methodological rigor of research on forced migration (see Jacobsen & Landau, 2003 for example). The IRC has made a strategic commitment to becoming evidence-based and has invested substantially in generating evidence, to address significant gaps. The product of an exhaustive review, the IRC recently made its strategic “Outcomes and Evidence Framework” (OEF) available publicly as an interactive web-based tool.³ The framework delivers key information on outcomes related to health, education, safety, power and economic empowerment, reinforcing the link between theories of change and evidence. It maps out detailed evidence for the interventions that work (and don’t work) to achieve their intended measured outcomes. As one of the strongest commitments by a large humanitarian organization to taking evidence seriously, the IRC’s OEF contributes towards institutionalizing the rigors of measurement within the humanitarian sector.

The development of evidence-based humanitarianism has important implications for the way that research questions are framed and the forms of data that we require to answer these. It compels us to address gaps in our evidence base through rigorous impact assessments, such as randomized

² <https://coresourceexchange.org/2018/03/core-launches-settle-cultural-orientation-mobile-app-refugees/>

³ <http://oef.rescue.org>



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control trials (RCTs) and other high quality experimental designs. To produce the standard of evidence we now require of ourselves, we pay particularly close attention to research design, to sampling, data collection methods, concerns over attrition, statistical power, minimum detectable effect and so on. The knowledge that we produce about refugees through these studies is defined very narrowly around the relationship between intervention and impact.

Refugees as an Economic Challenge

The third trend that I'll mention briefly refers to the long-awaited arrival of economists at what was described recently as a “club of lawyers” (Howden, Patchett, & Alfred, 2017). To be fair, the study of refugees was never exclusively a club of lawyers but there has been a notable lack of research on refugees by economists.⁴

In recent years the World Bank has become increasingly interested in forced migration as a significant factor in economic development. This has opened up space for economists to enter the debate. In 2013, the World Bank launched the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD), which was intended “as a global hub of knowledge and policy expertise on migration and development issues”. At a 2017 meeting of KNOMAD's Thematic Working Group on Forced Migration and Development, I was struck by a relatively recent proliferation of research by economists. It was also notable that there was a concentration of interest on internal displacement in Columbia. It soon became clear to me that this was propelled by the availability of sufficiently large and

robust datasets required for econometric analysis. It appears that data is an important enabling condition for economists to finally join the “club of lawyers”.

The analysis of forced migration through the lens of economics was also emphasised in the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. Paragraph 86 of the Declaration notes:

“We welcome the increasing engagement of the World Bank and multilateral development banks and improvements in access to concessional development financing for affected communities”.

In October 2017, the World Bank announced the establishment of a joint data center on forced displacement with UNHCR, with the intent to “greatly improve statistics on refugees, other displaced people and host communities”⁵ suggesting a further commitment to generating data on forced migration that is more accessible to rigorous economic analysis.

Unlike earlier efforts to frame forced migration as an economic development challenge (which go back to at least the 1970s), the current World Bank led initiative has emerged at a time when the availability of data on refugees is set to increase tremendously and when evidence-based humanitarian programming aligns closely with the dominant approaches and methods of development economics. As data becomes available, it is likely that we will see more engagements from economists that promise to enliven policy discussion related to forced migration.

⁴ *The Economic Lives of Refugees*, (Jacobsen, 2005) one of the few books on the subject, was authored by a non-economist.

⁵ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/10/20/new-world-bank-unhcr-joint-data-centre-to-improve-global-statistics-on-forced-displacement>



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More Data, Better Evidence and Economic Development: What’s the Problem?

Looking towards 2050, my argument starts from the somewhat obvious point that our understanding of refugee crises will be informed by more data—a lot more data! I’ve suggested that this will enable the optimization and more rigorous testing of interventions and a much stronger understanding of the economic aspects of forced migration. But will more data inevitably lead to better policies that inform more effective humanitarian responses that ultimately lead to demonstrably improved outcomes for refugees?

Jeff Crisp has recently questioned the assumptions that better data leads to better outcomes (Crisp, 2018). He argues that the increased risks to people’s privacy and security are of particular concern for vulnerable populations like refugees and migrants. He notes how enthusiastic governments are for the collection and sharing of data on refugees and migrants and points to the risks of data inadvertently identifying persons to the authoritarian states that they are fleeing from.

Beyond the concerns for privacy and safety, analyses of large datasets can often appear as extremely persuasive and even beyond question. For example, algorithms that learn from big data are designed to optimize decisions with an efficiency that is beyond human capability. But some scholars question our blind faith in big data. Mathematician Cathy O’Neil calls the algorithms that govern our lives “weapons of math destruction” (O’Neill, 2017). The main problem she identifies is the fallibility of the human decision-making that informs mathematically powered applications. Problems like bias, prejudice and misunderstanding are often

coded into algorithms in ways that are largely invisible to most observers or users and left uncorrected. The effects of these distortions are experienced disproportionately:

““Their verdicts, even when wrong or harmful, were beyond dispute or appeal. And they tended to punish the poor and oppressed in our society, while making the rich richer” (O’Neill, 2017, p. 3).

Like big data, evidence based humanitarianism also risks producing a “depoliticizing” effect, by prescribing essentially technical response to problems that are essentially rooted in injustice (c.f. Ferguson, 1994). Precise measurement of the intended causal effect of an intervention also generally ignores the possibility of unintended consequences, which may be quite significant and even desirable or beneficial from the point of view of target beneficiaries. The work of Loren Landau on the “Humanitarian Hangover” points to the important social effects of large aid programs on local governance and the integration of local economies into more globalized communities, quite apart from programmatic outcomes (Landau, 2008).

Increased data and a strong humanitarian focus on experimental research seems to have finally opened up space for economists to engage more seriously with the issue of forced migration. This is tremendously exciting but there are also good reasons to consider carefully the reframing of refugees as *homo economicus*. In the US, the public debate over refugee resettlement has shifted sharply towards questions of costs and benefits of refugees, losing sight of the humanitarian imperative. Whereas the data suggests that refugees do, on average, contribute positively to the US economy, this usually takes more than ten years to achieve and is obviously not inevitable for all refugees (Evans & Fitzgerald, 2017). Despite the best intentions to recognize refugee agency, framing refugees solely in terms of their



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economic value may also work against those who are most vulnerable, marginalized and in need of protection. Ironically, the marketing of refugees as economic assets reinforces and legitimizes, in some way, the Trumpian logic of self-interest before international obligation.

Conclusion: Refugees Remuddled?

The term “remuddling” in the title of this thought-piece is borrowed from the practice of restoring old houses.⁶ It is applied when well-intentioned attempts to update old structures that are dilapidated but architecturally authentic yield renewed buildings that are ugly, in the sense that they no longer reflect the original inspiration, purpose or form in any coherent way. In considering the rise of big data, evidence-based humanitarian practice and the economics of forced migration, I have suggested that there are risks that these may contribute towards remuddling the figure of the refugee, by stripping away the centralized narrative of displacement for the sake of function, efficiency and convenience. This is not inevitable. One way that we can mitigate this is by re-asserting the ongoing value of more intimate, qualitatively-based understandings of refugees that engage seriously with questions of experience, voice, agency and the politics of representation.

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⁶ I borrowed its use as a metaphor from Scheffler (2001).



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