Refugee Participation through Representative Committees: UNHCR and the Sudanese Committee in Beirut

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The notions of refugee participation and empowerment are core—but highly debated and poorly implemented—standards of humanitarian response. Drawing on empirical research in Lebanon, this article offers an account of the ways in which—and which not—meaningful refugee participation and empowerment are achieved through representative committees. Spotlighting the case of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-supported Sudanese refugee committee in Beirut 2014–2015, it focuses on three intricate and interrelated concerns—refugee participation, representation, and autonomy. The article finds that the design and function of the committee made it difficult for refugees to share authority with UNHCR over decisions that impact their lives. The committee was primarily seen by UNHCR as a good in and of itself rather than as an opportunity to actively involve refugees in decision-making processes. The article suggests that there is ample room for the development of more meaningful participation that better integrates the capabilities, preferences, and agencies of persons living as refugees.

Keywords: Lebanon, UNHCR, refugee participation, refugee empowerment

Introduction

All of the Sudanese in Lebanon they came to vote. Like how presidents are elected. So we voted.[1]

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The Sudanese had all their hopes hanging upon us, but we failed. What we wanted to achieve we didn't achieve. Why would someone nominate himself and [then] torment himself?[2]

These statements depict the positive and almost festive atmosphere that prevailed in the weeks and months in the summer of 2014 when a Sudanese refugee committee was established in Beirut, and the subsequent disappointment and even

despair that culminated in 2015 after only one year of being in function. The establishment and role of this United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-supported committee is the focus of this article, which seeks to spotlight key questions relating to refugee participation and empowerment through such refugee committees: Where does the formation of the Sudanese committee fit within UNHCR's policies on community development, refugee participation, and empowerment? Who was represented in this committee and who was not? In what way did—or did not—the committee amount to a practice of *meaningful* participation of refugees in decision-making processes? In other words, how, if at all, did the committee enhance refugee empowerment and the enjoyment of rights?

The analysis in this article is informed by an understanding that UNHCR's humanitarian work with refugees involves practices of both care and control, of emancipation and domination (Barnett 2011, 2012). These contradictory impulses, Barnett (2011: 105) argues, are best understood through the concept of paternalism, seen as an 'interference with a person's liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced' (Dworkin 1972: 70–76). Indeed, UNHCR's moral and expert authority on refugee issues has conferred on it the role of 'spokesperson for and guardian of refugees,' with the underlying assumption that it is UNHCR—and not the refugees themselves—that knows what is in their best interest (Barnett 2011: 105). One of the most important developments in the practice of paternalism in humanitarian governance is nonetheless the belief that there exist mechanisms of participation that give refugees and other subjects of humanitarian governance an ability to influence decisions that impact their lives (Barnett 2012: 517).

While the notion of refugee participation has long been considered a core standard of humanitarian response, recent years have seen an unprecedented push for greater participation of refugees in the decision-making processes that affect them (IASC 2019; Harley and Hobbs 2020). This is not the least evidenced in the UN Global Compact on Refugees (UN GCR 2018), the UN New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), and in emerging civil society- and refugee-led initiatives. One example is the Network for Refugee Voices (2017), which put forward a declaration that calls for the inclusion of refugees 'at every level of design and implementation of refugee-response programs' (para. 13). These processes represent an important shift in thinking by emphasizing not only participation per se but the *meaningful* participation of refugees; as the GCR recognizes: '[r]esponses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist' (UN GCR 2018: para. 34).

Yet, as an abundance of literature shows, refugee participation is one of the most poorly implemented standards in humanitarian responses (Brown and Donini 2014; Harley and Hobbs 2020; Kaga 2021). The practice of paternalism, coupled with the humanitarian sector's colonial past and structural racism, has been pointed to as roots of this poor implementation (Asylum Access 2021: 9; Janmyr 2022). Often, humanitarian interventions and solutions are also seen as irrelevant to refugees and have not addressed their actual needs (Clark-Kazak

2014; Crisp 2014). As has been recognized by the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRLN 2019: 22), 'one of the most profound barriers to meaningful participation is the ongoing practice of "tokenizing" refugees', with some efforts merely giving the illusion of inclusion. Urban refugees in particular have been marginalized in humanitarian responses, leading many to develop protection and assistance strategies that are independent of humanitarian programming (Buscher 2013; Crisp 2014). This article seeks to further the debate on refugee participation in these settings by discussing the case of the UNHCR-supported Sudanese refugee committee in Beirut 2014–2015. While it does not purport to provide conclusions generalizable to other contexts, the article aims nonetheless to detail an empirical case study that may be valuable to on-going discussions of refugee participation.

Based on empirical research with members of the Sudanese community, UNHCR and local NGOs, the article finds that the refugee committee as it was designed and implemented did not constitute a practice of meaningful participation. With clear constraints to refugee empowerment and rights being achieved, the committee was arguably more symbolic than real. Shedding light on three intricate and interrelated concerns—refugee participation, representation and autonomy—the article discusses how the committee essentially served as a tool for UNHCR to provide UNHCR with the 'refugee perspective' and as a means of reducing 'feelings' of powerlessness among Sudanese refugees. The article also finds that the composition of the Sudanese refugee committee and its autonomy vis-à-vis UNHCR were issues of great discussion and concern.

The research described in this article is part of a larger research project on refugee protection in Lebanon, for which fieldwork in Beirut was conducted between 2014 and 2017 and follow-up distanced conversations were had in 2020. In addition to the formal committee guidelines (UNHCR Lebanon 2014), the article is based on semi-structured interviews with 25 Sudanese asylum-seekers, refugees and individuals with closed files, two NGO staff as well as with 12 UNHCR staff at various levels of the organization. Given the contentious legal status of most of the participants in this study, consent was taken from all respondents, and, where appropriate, pseudonyms have been used.

The article is divided into three main parts. An introductory section offers a brief discussion of the situation of Sudanese refugees in Lebanon as well as of the concepts of refugee participation and empowerment. Section two describes the formation of the Sudanese refugee committee, highlighting especially its framework, terms of reference, and the elections that preceded its formation. Before conclusions are drawn, a third section analyses key issues and concerns, including questions of participation, representation, and autonomy.

Sudanese Refugees and Asylum in Lebanon

The dynamics and scope of Sudanese refugee participation are to be understood in the context of a Lebanese unwillingness to provide refugees with asylum, and a humanitarian focus over the past decade predominantly on Syrian displacement. Like many other states in the Middle East, Lebanon is not a party to the 1951

Convention on the Status of Refugees or to the 1967 Protocol (Janmyr 2017). The government has long taken the approach that Lebanon is not a country of asylum, and thus rejects the local integration of refugees. The country's alternative practices to asylum rather include long-term reliance on UNHCR to conduct registration, documentation and refugee status determination (RSD), and to provide assistance and seek durable solutions for refugees outside of Lebanon.

Since the 1990s, Sudanese refugees have been coming to Lebanon to seek asylum and access protection, aid, and the resettlement services of UNHCR. Along with Iraqi refugees, Sudanese refugees were long the main concern for UNHCR, with numbers in Lebanon around a few thousand between 1996 and 2006, and peaking at 50,000 between 2008 and 2010 (Janmyr 2022). However, with the large arrivals of Syrian refugees from 2011 and onwards, the number of Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers dropped in proportion to the more than one million Syrian refugees; by 2018, Sudanese refugees constituted merely four per cent of all 'persons of concern' to UNHCR in Lebanon (UNHCR 2019: 6).

Relatively small numbers of refugees have as such been 'tolerated' by Lebanese governments in anticipation of their resettlement to third countries or repatriation to their countries of origin. While resettlement has been the main durable solution for most Sudanese refugees in Lebanon, it has generally become increasingly difficult for UNHCR to resettle African refugees from Middle Eastern countries (UNHCR 2005). Between 2014 and 2016 there was also a notable standstill of selection missions by the USA, a main resettlement destination for Lebanon's Sudanese refugees (Kenner 2015).

In addition to the halt in resettlement operations, Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers have many other reasons for seeking to influence UNHCR protection and assistance through the establishment of refugee committees. In the past decade, humanitarian and political efforts have been largely redirected towards the Syrian response, causing programmes for 'non-Syrian' refugees to be underfunded and sidelined (Janmyr 2022). The annual *Vulnerability Assessment of Refugees of Other Nationalities in Lebanon* (VARON) highlights how Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers were among those who were 'systematically worse off, and at times significantly so, for virtually all indicators' (UNHCR 2019: 2, 5). Indeed, most Sudanese refugees reside irregularly in the country (UNHCR 2020, UNHCR 2021) and are as such vulnerable to arbitrary arrest, detention and deportation.

Refugee Participation and Empowerment through Refugee Committees

Over the past decades, UNHCR has shifted focus from top-down to more participatory approaches, seeking to treat refugees as 'agents rather than subjects' (Muggah 2005). In this vein, its commitment to establishing and supporting representative refugee committees is grounded in its community development approach, most recently revised through the reform process of UNHCR's Community Services function in 2011 (UNHCR 2003; UNHCR ExCom 2011). While refugee participation and empowerment are key standards of the

community development approach, as this section will detail, there are intricate challenges concerning the scope and extent of these concepts.

Harley and Hobbs (2020: 217) differentiate between 'passive or nominal' and more 'interactive or transformational' forms of participation. While the former might involve a situation where one or two refugees are invited to provide input to decisions or to legitimate existing processes, the latter may involve 'enabling refugees to be present and fulfil determinative roles at the agenda-setting stage of policy development' (Harley and Hobbs 2020: 217). Focusing on the former modes of participation, the GRLN (2019: 7) has also recently elaborated a set of guidelines on *meaningful* participation, defining this as:

> When refugees—regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity and demographics—are prepared for and participating in fora and processes where strategies are being developed and/or decisions are being made (including at local, national, regional, and global levels, and especially when they facilitate interactions with host states, donors, or other influential bodies), in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially.

For UNHCR, on the other hand, refugee participation refers to the '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' (UNHCR 2008: 16). The key words 'full and equal involvement' may indeed be subject to different interpretations, but it is noteworthy that in UNHCR's context, participation is rarely direct, but rather often by default mediated through leadership councils, committees, and organizations that speak on behalf of their 'constituencies' (UNHCR 2003: 47). Thus, to facilitate refugee participation, UNHCR's community services function is explicitly tasked with establishing community management structures, including refugee committees (UNHCR 2003: 43).

In humanitarian operations, passive participation appears to be most common, with the GRLN (2019: 8) emphasizing how 'tokenizing practices in refugee participation continue to permeate the refugee response space'. Recent research by Kaga (2021:14) on the participation of Syrian refugees in humanitarian programming in Lebanon has also highlighted how participatory standards are 'frequently co-opted, used to legitimate top-down decisions and maintain (rather than transform) unequal structural power relations'. Kaga (2021: 14–15) highlights three major barriers to meaningful participation; first, 'a lack of clarity around what meaningful participation means and what achieving this entails', 'the local context and how this shapes participatory processes', and 'the operational, funding and power structures of the humanitarian system itself'.

In a different context, Olivius (2014a) suggests that the forms of refugee participation called for in humanitarian policy discourses and institutionalized in humanitarian aid practice are very limited. Drawing on research with Burmese refugee communities in Bangladesh and Thailand, she argues that participation served two main purposes: to create active refugees who will govern themselves in accordance with norms and rules disseminated by humanitarian organizations, and to make refugees feel involved and responsible for matters of camp life and foster in

them the capabilities of self-regulation, activity, and responsibility. Participation, in this case, was used as therapeutic intervention and not for structural reform (Olivius 2014a: 57). The early work of Hyndman (1997) and Turner (2001) describe similar findings of refugee participation being employed as a technology of government aiming not to change relations of power or redistribute decision-making power, but rather to alter the subjectivities and the psychological state of refugees.

When it comes to empowerment, the second important feature of UNHCR's community development approach, UNHCR defines it in the following way:

> Power can be defined as the capacity to make informed choices and have the freedom to take action. Empowerment is not something that is "done" to people; it is the process by which individuals in the community analyze their situation, enhance their knowledge and resources, strengthen their capacity to claim their rights, and take action to achieve their goals. At the same time, their capacities and skills are recognized by others. Empowerment requires change at the individual and structural levels. (UNHCR 2008: 20)

Empowerment is as such both a perception (that the individual perceives that they have the ability to control their environment) and a process (by which that perception is realized). Considered by UNHCR to be a part of its protection policy, the community development approach seeks to 'enable staff to empower refugees and other persons of concern to the Office by working alongside them to identify and introduce measures that will make a positive difference to their life, as well as the life of their host community' (UNHCR ExCom 2011: 2).

Research on refugee empowerment has brought to light different ways of conceptualizing empowerment, noting among other things that humanitarian actors and refugees may not necessarily have the same understanding of what this empowerment entails. Steimel's (2017: 99) research on negotiating refugee empowerment in resettlement organizations showed forcefully how refugees who resisted a certain conception of empowerment were seen as 'unreasonably entitled rather than as holding reasonable, alternative self-determined goals'. In particular, 'refugees were labeled as "problematic" if they complained or resisted those definitions, and were sanctioned for noncompliance' (Steimel 2017: 103).

The literature has furthermore pointed to how the idea of refugee 'empowering' has at least two problematic aspects to it. First, as Olivius (2014b: 93) has noted, there is a risk that certain groups of refugees are played off against others, and second, as argued by Turner (2005: 54), the emphasis on empowerment risks fostering an understanding of empowerment as a feeling rather than an agency. Drawing upon these scholarly insights on refugee participation and empowerment, I will get back to these considerations in section three of this article.

The Sudanese Refugee Committee in Beirut

This section explores the formation of the Sudanese refugee committee in Beirut 2014–2015 by looking closer at the committee's terms of reference as well as the committee elections. While a previous committee had been established and then

quickly abandoned in 2011, in 2014, following requests from the Sudanese community, UNHCR agreed to re-launch the initiative. This time, UNHCR tasked one of its implementing partners—a local NGO specialized on civil society development—to assist in establishing and coordinating the new committee.[3] Thus, there were essentially three sets of key actors involved: UNHCR, its NGO implementing partner, and the Sudanese refugees themselves.

Committee Framework and Terms of Reference

The refugee committee's terms of reference were largely settled prior to the election of the representative members. Together with a smaller, UNHCR-selected group of refugees, UNHCR's Community Development Unit in Beirut developed detailed election guidelines (UNHCR Lebanon 2014). These guidelines to a large degree also functioned as the committee's 'constitution' in that they pertained to a wide range of committee issues other than the election process.[4] In the absence of consolidated guidance material from UNHCR on running and developing refugee committees, there was wide scope for UNHCR and the selected refugees to develop the terms of committee engagement as they pleased.[5] The resulting guidelines, published in English and Arabic, appear thus to consolidate the views of both UNHCR and refugees, but, as will be evident in excerpts below, the language is at once both overly complicated and ingenuous, and at times repetitive and inconsistent.

Focusing on the formation and work of the representative committee, the guidelines include sections on the eligibility and preferred profile of committee members, the election process, and the responsibilities and internal organization of the committee. The guidelines establish that the committee consist of nine UNHCR-registered members—six refugees and three asylum seekers—elected for one year at a time (UNHCR Lebanon 2014). This includes a President, Vice President, Treasurer and Secretary.

The guidelines are framed in terms of empowerment and rights, setting forth that the 'main objective' of the committee is '...to further enhance collaboration and consultations with refugees which leads to empowerment and enjoyments of rights' (UNHCR Lebanon 2014). In particular, the purpose is to '...establish systemic and regular contacts with refugee community in all issues of their concern or interest, such as protection and security issues, delivery of assistance, health services, subsistence allowance, education, etc'. The guidelines also lay out the committee's terms of reference, stipulating that the main responsibilities include the following:

- Liaising between refugees and UNHCR
- Undertaking regular monthly meetings between the committee and UNHCR that are jointly agreed upon
- Providing proposals and suggestions to UNHCR on issues that are of interest to the Sudanese refugees and to improve UNHCR's programmes in areas such as health, education, etc.
- Helping refugees to know about their rights and how to attain these rights (awareness raising)

- Comprising of Sudanese from different regions around Lebanon in order to following [sic] on the situation of refugees
- Informing first the office (protection) in case of emergency; if there is no response it should be brought to the attention of the representative. In case there is no response from the latter, the committee reserves the right to submit a complaint to HQ (investigation section) or to another humanitarian agency or figure in Lebanon.
- Meetings with UNHCR colleagues will be held once per 2 months and two focal persons from [NGO] will be always in contact with the committee. [NGO] will open its doors once per week for the committee to meet and do its activities and will give them access to internet, phone and other facilities. The use of the facilities should be restricted only for community activities and should be coordinated with the management of the centre.

Aiming to secure refugee participation, representation and autonomy, the guidelines furthermore provide that 'the committee will be delegated by all refugees to speak on their behalf in any meetings or dialogue with UNHCR, partners or donors etc.' and that and 'the role and responsibility of this committee will be determined by refugees in a meeting to be facilitated by UNHCR and its partners' (UNHCR Lebanon 2014).

In addition, the committee was to be 'multi-functional' in the sense that not only UNHCR's Community Development Unit but *all* UNHCR departments were to be involved.[6] From the perspective of UNHCR, and to the dismay of committee members, individual cases were not to be discussed and meetings would rather focus on 'procedural aspects and be an opportunity to provide general updates'.[7] Over the course of the year, however, a decision was taken by UNHCR that its RSD Unit should no longer regularly attend the committee meetings.[8] This is noteworthy as UNHCR's RSD processes were precisely one of the community's key concerns.

Overall, then, the tasks and responsibilities of the committee were plentiful, and gave the Sudanese community fair reason to believe that the work they put into the Committee would have a meaningful impact throughout the community. Of course, however, deciding who should be a part of the committee was not a straightforward task. This question is discussed further in the below sections.

Committee Elections

The election process took place over three consecutive Sundays after Ramadan in 2014. The first Sunday went to the announcement of the election and to the registration of candidates, the second saw campaigning at the Candidate's Forum, while the third was Election Day.[9] The guidelines provide details on each of these processes. Most importantly, they establish that 'the committee will be nominated and then elected by the refugees themselves' (UNHCR Lebanon 2014). Individuals may self-nominate, but nominations are also accepted by 'the community'. Before the time of the election, there had been smaller,

informal groups seeking to improve the conditions of the Sudanese community in Lebanon. Several of those who were part of these initiatives were nominated by the community and were subsequently elected to the committee.[10] Two or three committee members had additionally nominated themselves.

Under the guidelines, a Candidate's Forum was to proceed in the following manner:

> The Forum will be scheduled in the second week of the elections process based on the involved candidates' schedules, and the involved candidates are strongly encouraged to attend. The format of the forum is left to the discretion of the Elections Managers, but it generally includes public speeches and a debate. The discussion should be so moderated that the candidates have approximately equal speaking time. After the forum there should be an opportunity for voters to informally meet candidates in all races, not just those who participated in the forum. (UNHCR Lebanon 2014)

On Election Day, representatives from UNHCR and its NGO implementing partner, as well as a considerable proportion of the Sudanese community, gathered at a school in a Beirut suburb.[11] The guidelines describe the process in detail:

> On the day of the elections, voting goes live at approximately 8:30 and closes at 2:00PM. 4:00PM is the deadline to file complaints (including appeals) for the election. If no complaints have been filed, the election results will be announced later in the afternoon or evening. If a complaint has been filed, the election results will not be tallied (privately or publicly) until the complaint has been addressed. (UNHCR Lebanon 2014)

Many of my Sudanese informants speak of an up-beat and excited atmosphere, and a UNHCR staff member who was present told me that 'so many people attended the election. There was a very positive ambience and it felt like they [the Sudanese] were very happy about this taking place...It was almost as if it were a national election'.[12] These sentiments aside, the establishment and running of the committee brought about a number of intricate issues and concerns. The next section seeks to spotlight some of these.

Enhancing Refugee Empowerment and Rights

To what extent did the Sudanese refugee committee enhance refugee empowerment and the enjoyment of rights, as envisaged in the guidelines (UNHCR Lebanon 2014)? And how, if at all, did it amount to a practice of meaningful participation? The formation and running of the committee encountered several difficulties, and this part will shed light on three of the most intricate concerns: refugee participation, representation and autonomy.

Refugee Participation

UNHCR has a duty to facilitate the meaningful participation of refugees in decisions affecting them. Yet, staff at UNHCR Beirut appeared to have had mixed feelings about the necessity of establishing a representative committee for the

Sudanese. One UNHCR official explained to me how UNHCR '...wanted to have a better communication with the community and a better link for our relationship with the communities and, for example, for certain cases not to fall into crack...'.[13] Another staff member, however, questioned altogether the need of the committee:

> I think we felt...do they need their own committee, when they have access every day to the reception where people come and talk to us? Maybe not, maybe not. But if that is something that the community makes them feel good, makes them feel appreciated, and makes them feel recognized, then why not ... I think perhaps we were more sensitive to the need for them to have access to us in this way because we were also aware the fact that there have been refugees in this country for years and then this massive influx and so much attention was turned to that, we were clear on the need to make sure all other nationalities feel included and accessible, in every way accessible to them. And with the Sudanese, they lived this for the second time. They lived it in 2007 with the Iraqis when the whole world was interested in the Iraqis, so this was the second time ... So again they were feeling ... they felt that their voice was not so loud.[14]

While my own observations at the UNHCR office indicate that access to UNHCR's reception was not always granted nor unhindered, this statement appears to suggest that there was no actual *need* for the committee, but that if it made the Sudanese feel better, then why not. A similar argument was put forward during another conversation with another UNHCR staff member:

> From my perspective, it's really important to have these meetings [with the Sudanese committee]. To share information, but more than anything else I think there is a psychologically important reason that have these committees. To show that they are taken seriously. Of course, then you also have to take their voices seriously, but I think that that is important – we have to listen to you because you know best which problems there are in the community.[15]

UNHCR appears thus to have been only marginally invested in securing the meaningful participation of Sudanese refugees in important decision-making processes. Not only was refugee participation seen by UNHCR as more consultative than transformational, it was also largely considered more therapeutic than structural. This is in contrast to the motivations—structural reform and tangible influence—of the participating refugees, and essentially meant that there was no unified understanding among the key actors about the meaning and prospects of refugee participation.

The design and implementation of the Sudanese refugee committee did notably not amount to meaningful participation as recently conceptualized by the GRLN. Refugee participation did not confer power and influence over the decisions that impacted their lives, and being largely limited to consultation, the Sudanese committee members were also not 'positioned and prepared as equal partners' (GRLN 2019: 8, 13). While it is also increasingly recognized that refugees should be compensated for their time, expertise and work (GRLN 2019: 21), many committee members had put in significant amounts of unpaid labour, which obviously

took them away from their own subsistence activities. The prospect of giving up on their own livelihood activities without compensation and only for the psychological effect of 'feeling better' or 'feeling included' was by some of my informants seen as outright offensive.

Thus, while UNHCR policy emphasizes that participation 'promotes protection and reduces feelings of powerlessness' (UNHCR 2008: 18) the Beirut case appears to indicate the opposite. Contrary to what UNHCR staff presumed, the committee did not automatically make Sudanese refugees 'feel better'. Committee members had high expectations on themselves—and from the community that they represented—that they would have the power and ability to influence protection and assistance. When it became clear that their influence was very limited, it caused much emotional distress among the members. As Kamal tells me in great sadness: '. . .our hope was for the committee to achieve the goals of the Sudanese. But unfortunately, we weren't able to achieve anything'.[16] The risk of re-victimization and re-traumatization in cases where participation is not meaningful has notably also been recognized by the GRLN (2019: 8).

Participation was additionally not linked in a purposeful manner to the perceived needs and aspirations of the population. Rather than involving the refugees in real decision-making, the committee was perceived as an attempt at simply keeping refugee protest at bay, and committee members were frequently asked by UNHCR to liaison with protesters outside of the UNHCR office. The past decade has seen numerous sit-ins and demonstrations targeting UNHCR, and the committee was therefore seen as a way to channel these voices through conformative means. Due to frustration with the committee work, however, this objective was not met as several committee members became involved in the 2015 sit-in outside UNHCR (Janmyr 2022).

Refugee Representation

The composition of the Sudanese refugee committee was a topic of great discussion and concern. On the policy level, UNHCR has stressed the importance of refugee committees being representative of the wider community in terms of gender, age, disabilities and groups that have been discriminated against (UNHCR 2008: 61). The guidelines developed by the GRLN (2019: 12) take this one step further by recognizing that: 'All refugees, resettled or in their first countries of refuge; with or without legal status; with all levels of formal education; and inclusive of all genders, sexual identities, religions, ethnic groups, those with disabilities, youth and elders, among other identities, should be included in important discussions that impact their lives'. However, rather than ensuring that committee members be representative of the wider community in terms of, for example, gender, ethnicity or age, the Beirut guidelines establish the following set of *qualities* that committee members should possess in order to be eligible:

- committed enough to give time
- familiar with the situation of refugees and their conditions

- recognized by the office and bear the UN refugee card
- non-discriminatory
- credible and transparent vis-à-vis the refugees
- a skilled negotiator
- have a good reputation and trustworthy
- have never been sentenced or charged. Not to have legal problems
- serve others voluntary and transmit the concerns of others without pay

While many of these characteristics were generally unproblematic, a few raised concern and debate. First, the requirement that committee members are recognized by UNHCR and 'bear the refugee card' was seen as problematic by many committee members as it clearly excluded the so-called 'closed-file'-individuals, who were officially not allowed to stand for election nor to vote in the elections. These closed-file individuals had had their asylum applications rejected by UNHCR and were as such officially not of concern to the Office. However, the 'closed-file'-cases were certainly not conclusive nor straightforward, and at the time that the committee was established, UNHCR was reviewing many of these cases.

Thus, while members of the Sudanese community had advocated for the committee to include individuals with closed files and for these individuals to also participate in elections, UNHCR staff were of the opinion that, 'You can absolutely not include those with closed files. You simply cannot. Those with closed files that think they have good reasons to get them re-opened will have to lobby those in the elected committee'.[17] While the 'closed-file'-individuals were officially excluded from all aspects of committee work, interviews with both UNHCR staff and with members of the Sudanese community nonetheless confirm that those with 'closed files' *did* participate in various aspects of the committee. One UNHCR staff member explains how, '. . .in the Sudanese elected committee there were someone who had his file closed but they said, "we want them to be in this committee" so he was also elected'.[18] There was as such certain flexibility—for certain individuals—when it came to the composition of the committee.

Second, albeit much less debated, the guidelines specify that only those 'who do not have a criminal record and history of conflicts with the office can apply [to be members of the Sudanese committee]' (UNHCR Lebanon 2014). This requirement had potentially very troublesome effects in light of the difficulties of most Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers to secure legal residency in Lebanon. Being irregularly present in Lebanon is considered a criminal offence. The requirement to not have a history of conflicts with UNHCR appears also to disqualify from committee participation the many Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers who over the years had participated in protests outside UNHCR's office in Beirut. As such, some protesters and committee members argued, the committee contributed to more strife within the community by pitting those supporting protest as a means of rights claiming against those supporting formal collaboration with UNHCR.

Third, the guidelines provide that the elected committee members 'serve others voluntary and transmit the concerns of others without pay'. Nonetheless, questions of corruption and clientelism arose repeatedly in my conversations with members of the Sudanese community. While the validity of these claims are difficult to assess, recent scholarship does point to the extensive role of corruption in the context of humanitarian operations in Lebanon (BouChabke and Haddad 2021). There were thus widespread rumours that members closest to UNHCR had access to special privileges, and that certain members were engaged in corrupt practices. A named committee member was perceived to be operating a shady business of sorting out UNHCR appointments and opening previously closed UNHCR files for a payment in the range of 250–500 USD per file. The rumours caused much commotion and protest within the Sudanese community, and brought about a sense within the community that their interests were in fact not best represented by the committee. As Faheem tells me outright: 'no one represents us'.[19] Or, in the words of Mustafa:

> I thought I wanted to help the rest of the Sudanese, that was my idea. If the committee has one unified voice, and if they go to the Office they have one unified voice, that was my goal. But everyone came with their own [personal] goal. My goal was different from theirs. I wanted to gain experience, and if there's a chance to help in education, these were my goals, not to work for myself. My goal was for everyone to work together and help everyone.[20]

These findings are particularly interesting in light of a recent study by Dinbabo *et al.* (2021: 3789) suggesting that, given the inevitability of diversity of interests among refugees, full representation of all population groups and of all interests by a given leadership structure in refugee-led organizations is rare and difficult to achieve.

Refugee Autonomy

The refugee committee did not further the self-determined objectives of the Sudanese refugee community in Beirut but rather gave the illusion of being autonomous. Despite the promise in the Beirut guidelines that the committee will be nominated and elected by the refugees themselves, from the very beginning, the committee was wrought with tension concerning ownership and autonomy—did the committee belong more to the refugees or more to UNHCR? It is arguably also here that UNHCR's paternalism surfaces most explicitly. Aggravating this tension were also complex questions of mistrust and rumour, as raised in the section above.

Two main issues arise as to the question of refugee autonomy. First, UNHCR's role in forming the committee. Several members of the Sudanese community protested about the elections not being transparent enough and voiced mistrust against UNHCR staff and their motives.[21] Under the guidelines, the polling committee included three Sudanese refugees assigned by the community, a representative of the local NGO and a UNHCR staff member. The polling committee was

tasked with, among other things, overseeing the elections and investigating alleged violations and appeals. However, the validity of each nominator was to be assessed by UNHCR Community Services and Protection staff jointly. Several members of the Sudanese community nonetheless speak of an opaque process of registering candidates and make a claim that, in fact, UNHCR selected candidates who already had close ties to the office. As Abdo tells me:

> If the elections were held in the presence of officials from the office, and if they were fair and transparent elections, then this would have been the best thing, because it would have served the Sudanese. But when you [UNHCR] choose them by yourself, and have certain people to elect. This means the elections aren't transparent and aren't serving the Sudanese ... Supposedly we Sudanese, we gather alone and choose who we would like to represent us, and go to them saying we choose those people ... Not them choosing for us people.[22]

Kamal tells me that, based on previous experiences, the Sudanese community sought to limit UNHCR's involvement in the elections as much as possible. He explains how: 'We refused the interference of the office. Because I know them, and I know what they do. At the beginning we agreed, us the Sudanese, we were 26 nominees, we refused the interference of the office, but they came for supervision and to get the ballot boxes ... We warned them from the start, "nothing will make you interfere"'.[23] An NGO worker confirms this, telling me how the Sudanese in fact '...tried to stop the election ... they disagreed that the UNHCR monitored this election, they don't trust UNHCR'.[24]

Following the election, complaints were also submitted to the UNHCR office in Beirut. One letter was titled 'objection by the refugees on the intervention of some UN staff in the formation of a committee of refugees after repeated sit-ins in front of the UNHCR office by Sudanese refugees and their demand to find a solution'.[25] The nine-point Letter calls out a named staff member of UNHCR and asks UNHCR to 'stop' them and their 'partners' from having anything to do with Sudanese refugees because 'we have lost confidence in them and do not want to deal with them at all'. It is obviously not possible to assess the validity of any of these claims, but the point here is rather to emphasize the role of mistrust and rumours in fostering an idea that the committee served the interests of not only UNHCR, but specifically of certain UNHCR staff members. This created a seemingly widespread collective understanding that the committee was not autonomous in its design or function but rather merely a tool for UNHCR. Similar experiences have also been described in the literature on refugee interactions with UNHCR's decision makers (Biehl 2015; Espinoza 2018; Özkul and Jarrous 2021).

Even though UNHCR's policies stress that participation requires that instead of 'informing and deciding for people, we listen to them' (UNHCR 2008: 16), the Sudanese refugee committee primarily served as a means for UNHCR to disseminate information to refugees and to provide UNHCR with the refugee perspective. Thus, it was not a real attempt at including refugees in decision-making. Similar to what Inhetveen (2010: 171) has described elsewhere, the refugee

representatives ended up serving as 'bridges for passing orders, supporting governance rather than controlling it'. To a certain extent, and as pointed to in a previous section, the supporting role of the refugees to UNHCR activities was apparent in the guidelines, clarifying among other things that '[t]he committee members are requested to attend *proposed meetings by UNHCR*' and '[a]s requested, members are also asked to *support UNHCR office* if any negotiating is needed with the larger community group' (UNHCR Lebanon 2014, emphasis my own). Thus, in line with Barnett's understanding of paternalism, the committee was arguably neither designed nor implemented as an autonomous entity seen as capable of taking its own decisions about how best to function and which issues to focus on.

Conclusions

This article has sought to further the debate on meaningful refugee participation in urban settings by spotlighting the case of the UNHCR-supported Sudanese refugee committee in Beirut 2014–2015. By drawing on the guidelines developed by UNHCR Beirut together with a selected group of refugees, as well as on interviews with key actors, the article offers a rare account of the ways in which—or which not—refugee participation and empowerment are achieved through representative committees. It has brought to the fore the constraints and concerns regarding core questions of refugee participation, representation and autonomy, arguing that while committee members themselves sought structural change and influence, the committee was by UNHCR primarily seen as a good in and of itself and not as an opportunity to actively involve refugees in decision-making processes that influence their lives. This finding does not sit easily with recent conceptualizations of meaningful refugee participation as articulated, for example, in the GRLN guidelines or in the Global Compact on Refugees.

The research discussed in this article importantly confirms and extends on findings elsewhere by Harley and Hobbs (2020) and Kaga (2021) on how refugee participation often is used to legitimate top-down decisions and maintain (rather than transform) unequal structural power relations, and by Turner (2001, 2005) and Olivius (2014b) on how the emphasis on empowerment risks fostering an understanding of empowerment as a feeling rather than an agency. While the representative committee's limited influence on protection and assistance led to members describing increased feelings of distress, the article also details important acts of agency. Committee members and members of the broader Sudanese community alike objected to the circumstances around committee elections, protested the conditions of the committee work, and, ultimately, joined a sit-in set up outside the UNHCR's Beirut office. These acts of agency did not, however, detract from the overall impression that interventions seeking to empower may enforce marginalization by giving merely a guise of agency and representation. As the GRLN (2019: 22) recently also has emphasized, tokenization is indeed 'a form of silencing that can cause further pain and trauma...'.

The closer examination of refugee representation and empowerment through the Sudanese representative committee in Beirut ultimately reveals that the design and function of the committee made it difficult for refugees to share authority with UNHCR over decisions that impact their lives. At the very core of this issue lay the ingrained power inequalities of the broader humanitarian system, where top-down and paternalistic approaches work in tandem with an understanding of humanitarian accountability that is skewed towards donors rather than towards UNHCR's 'persons of concern'. Despite global attempts at developing mechanisms of participation that give refugees an ability to influence decisions that impact their lives, as this article shows, UNHCR's work with refugees continues to involve practices of both emancipation and domination. The approach taken by UNHCR to the formation and running of the Sudanese committee in Beirut suggests that the organization still largely believes that it knows better than the refugees themselves what is in their best interest. As a result, merely tokenized, symbolic representation—and not meaningful participation—was achieved through the committee.

This case study suggests that there is ample room for the development of more meaningful participation that better, and more honestly, integrates the capabilities, preferences and agencies of persons living as refugees. Processes along these lines are underway in many parts of the world. Asylum Access (2021) has notably argued that the power dynamics hindering equitable partnerships in forced displacement cannot be meaningfully addressed without unpacking the sector's colonial past and ongoing structural racism, while the GRLN (2019: 16) has specifically recommended that UNHCR 'should begin to design a new set of governance structures that include refugees and refugee-led groups in strategizing and decision-making within its local, regional and global constructs . . .'. Harley and Hobbs (2020) have similarly explored two options that could further promote the moral, political and legal authority of meaningfully including refugees in the design and implementation of policy; on the one hand, a set of indicators that establish baselines and track refugee participation in decision-making processes, and, on the other, a non-binding UN Declaration on the Participation of Refugees in Decision-Making. Initiatives and discussions such as these are all sorely needed and much welcome.

ENDNOTES

1. Suma, 18 January 2016. All interviews were conducted in Beirut.
2. Kamal, 10 March 2016.
3. NGO staff, 20 April 2016.
4. Senior UNHCR official and official, 12 May 2016.
5. Senior UNHCR official and official, 12 May 2016.
6. UNHCR official, 13 January 2017.
7. UNHCR official, 13 January 2017.
8. UNHCR official, 13 January 2017.
9. Senior UNHCR official and official, 12 May 2016.
10. Mustafa, 9 March 2016.

11. NGO staff, 20 April 2016.
12. UNHCR official, 13 January 2017.
13. Senior UNHCR official and official, 12 May 2016.
14. Senior UNHCR official and official, 12 May 2016.
15. UNHCR official, 13 January 2017.
16. Kamal, 10 March 2016.
17. UNHCR official, 13 January 2017
18. Senior UNHCR official and official, 12 May 2016.
19. Faheem, 29 March 2016.
20. Mustafa, 9 March 2016.
21. Senior UNHCR official and official, 12 May 2016; Abdo, 25 January 2016; Amna, 19 January 2016.
22. Abdo, 25 January 2016.
23. Kamal, 10 March 2016.
24. NGO staff, 20 April 2016.
25. N.D. On file with author.

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