

## In Praise of Dependencies: Dispersed dependencies and displacement<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract

Re-conceiving or re-framing the humanitarian consequences of displacement in terms of ‘dispersed dependencies’, a term drawn from the field of mental health, sheds light on the disruptive experience of displacement and on relations with other displaced people, hosts, states and humanitarian actors. Dependency for a person is neither a problem nor abnormal; independence is in effect about having a viable set of dispersed dependencies. This description, when applied in the context of disaster or displacement, challenges some humanitarian attitudes and offers some positive directions for humanitarians seeking to engage in assistance that is sustainable, contextual, and focused on human choice and dignity.

### Introduction

Humanitarian aid is sometimes accused of ‘creating dependency’, undermining sustainable self-sufficiency and demeaning its recipients. The twin ideas that dependency is a bad thing and that free assistance *de facto* creates dependency have long roots in the history of humanitarianism. In this article we put forward the case that there is value in challenging the conceptualisation of dependency as inherently negative. In fact, we believe that the recognition that people inherently and healthily have a multiplicity of dependencies opens up new ways for humanitarian practitioners to engage positively with displaced and conflict-affected people. We argue that there is no such thing as independence in terms of survival, and that therefore dependency should be seen not only as inevitable but as a good thing if approached constructively. Yet there seems to be a reluctance for humanitarian actors to acknowledge that the ability to depend on assistance is in reality positive, and that the needs of crisis-affected people can to some degree be re-cast as a need to be able to rely upon others.<sup>ii</sup>

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We argue that dependency as a concept is best recognised as multi-faceted and complex, consisting of diverse relationships that provide both material and non-material goods, such as emotional and social ties, and are part of geographical and cultural settings. Humanitarians should plan activities in relation to this reality – help to foster (other) ‘good’ dependencies, fill in gaps in ‘necessary’ dependencies, and reflect these roles as appropriate at different stages of a crisis.

In this article we largely focus our analysis on dependencies and assistance in relation to displacement, which we conceptualise as in a significant sense the rupturing of dependencies. We employ the concept of ‘dispersed dependencies’ to look at the creation and re-creation of dependencies in situations of displacement. Within the humanitarian system dependencies are not recognised or valued as part of the necessary description of the lives of affected or displaced people, and are therefore often misunderstood, ignored, or undermined. There *are* validated forms of dependency – resilience, coping, community, etc. – but these are not generally recognised as related to dependency. At the worst, they are used as reasons to reduce or refuse humanitarian assistance. We argue that the concept of dispersed dependencies offers a means to shift the humanitarian mindset and offers a practical tool for the assessment of humanitarian need (recognising that ‘need’ too is a disputed category). Through these conceptual and practical adjustments, humanitarians may offer better integrated support to displaced people’s dependencies.

We suggest that humanitarian action can be framed to act constructively with sets of people’s dependencies. In particular, we explore dependencies among displaced people, between displaced people and their local hosts and state, and between displaced people and humanitarian actors. We also reference how these relationships are disrupted, including at times by humanitarian organisations. We endeavour to explore rather than condemn this disruption, acknowledge that such disruptions can be positive or negative for displaced people, and we then discuss how this reconceptualisation might be applied in some aspects of humanitarian practice. Our empirical material draws on examples from our past work as researchers and practitioners focusing on the self-reliance, livelihoods, and food security of displaced people rather than explicit fieldwork examining dependency. We complement this knowledge with references to literature on forced migrants and dependency, extending to social networks, self-reliance, and relationships with (host) states and humanitarian governance. In this way we seek to illustrate and demonstrate the utility of a theoretical framework – dispersed dependencies – through multiple illustrative examples from our own and others’ work.

## Dependency and dispersed dependencies

This article seeks to add to the discussion on dependency by borrowing a concept from a field not generally perceived as related to humanitarianism, namely psychology. 'Dispersed dependencies' is an idea formulated by the psychologist George Kelly (1905-1967). For Kelly, dispersed dependencies refers to the set of individuals' relationships, where they have practical, emotional, social, physical, and other dependencies. Discussing the supposed 'dependence-independence' binary, which Kelly posits forms 'a major reference axis in the lives of most people', he construes dependence and independence as false opposites (Kelly, 1962, pp. 199-200). Instead he argues that all humans have their various needs met through a set of dispersed dependencies; the most independent or self-sufficient person is the person who has the most reliable and most dispersed set of dependencies to suit their circumstances. Personal independence is about having a viable set of dispersed dependencies – dependency is neither a problem nor abnormal. (No man is an island, as the poet said.)

Humanitarians interested in 'participation' and 'beneficiary consultation' would find much that is familiar in the ideas of Kelly and his followers, in particular his emphasis on the centrality of the personal construction of reality – an analogue of the importance of the views of the person affected by a disaster in formulating a response to the objective circumstances that affect them. Kelly (1955/1991) developed a theory of 'personal construct psychology' and his ideas are still in use to explore personality and uncover patterns of behaviour.<sup>iii</sup> Kelly's interests were in large part clinical, and in that context he developed the idea of a person's dependencies as the keys to their ability to cope with change. We see an important analogy with the ability of displaced people to cope with their new condition of displacement.

Various studies employing Kelly's 'dependency grids' (discussed further below), which are used to chart people's emotional dependencies, have found, for example, that those with the fewest number of dependencies tend to relapse into hospitalisation more (Smith et al., 2007). This and other studies (Walker et al., 1988) suggest the value of viewing emotional and social support through a dispersed dependency framework in order to evaluate and plan for different types of assistance provided to both individuals and particular populations based on their actual circumstances.

Dispersed dependencies in the humanitarian realm could become a lens through which to analyse not only existing and missing social and emotional dependencies, as was Kelly's focus, but physical and economic dependencies as well. While people may have needs in a variety of areas – food, safety, citizenship, love – the lens of dispersed dependencies provides a means to analyse the relationships that constitute such dependencies and which therefore fulfil these needs.

There seem to be several potential advantages to looking at crisis situations and conducting assessments and planning programmes through the perspective of disaster-affected people having dispersed dependencies. Taking this view might enable agencies to apply a nuanced perspective to help deal with issues and activities that are troubling or contentious, and focus on sustainable outcomes beyond immediate needs. Those affected by disasters will be seen in a way that reflects their complicated reality, and the implications of this can be drawn out in practice. We argue that this perspective can provide both a conceptual and a practical framework that will increase the likelihood that some of the more enduring problems of humanitarian action will be better addressed. This is not, however, to imply that this suggested terminology and concept will either be a panacea or suddenly make us undertake a completely new set of actions.

#### *Displaced People and Dispersed Dependencies*

One area of humanitarian discourse where dependency features widely is the generally stigmatised dependence of displaced people on international humanitarian assistance. Historically, this has most often centred around so-called 'refugee dependency', a metaphor itself from the mental health field (RPG, 1985) that was often used to describe refugees who were perceived as dependent on aid for survival, lethargic, and unable or unwilling to support themselves. Similarly, 'refugee dependency syndrome' was a widely used term and object of inquiry in the 1980s (though earlier discussions of it exist) when the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and other refugee-serving agencies recognised that fewer and fewer refugees were repatriating, and that millions continued to reside in camps without immediate prospects of 'solutions'. Some blamed refugees themselves for their apparent dependence on aid, although as the decade progressed more and more aid workers and academics began to blame the strict structure of assistance, which left little room for refugees to state their preferences and needs and thus encouraged passivity in aid beneficiaries (Mazur, 1988, pp. 15-16).

The concept of refugee dependency has since then to some extent been challenged, for example in Kibreab's (1993) 'myth of dependency' and a wider recognition by practitioners that receiving aid is generally just one livelihoods strategy among others. Barbelet and Wake (2017) found for example that utilising pre-existing social networks was a crucial way for Central African refugees to receive support in Cameroon immediately after displacement. A range of other work problematises the notion of self-reliance as individually and economically based and in so doing begins to reconceive dependency too (Easton-Calabria et al., 2017, Field et al., 2017, p. 54).

In 2005, Paul Harvey and Jeremy Lind put forward the case that "the focus should be, not how to avoid dependency, but how to provide ... assistance so that those who most need it understand what they are entitled to, and can rely on it as part of their own efforts to survive and recover from crisis".<sup>iv</sup> They use the concept of interdependency (Dean 2004) in support of a similar argument as dispersed dependencies "to understand ... the role that aid plays within the multiple forms of interdependency that make up people's livelihoods, and how these change during crises" (Harvey and Lind, 2005). Our additional point here is specifically about the value of the dispersed nature of dependencies. Arguably other versions of the recognition that dependencies can strengthen rather than weaken individuals or populations exist in the humanitarian field within positively valued concepts such as social capital, networks, community, or community-based protection – but without a wider explanatory framework such as we think dispersed dependencies provides. If taken into account, the dispersion of dependencies as set out by Kelly and his followers might make agencies more cautious about withdrawing support from those who have knitted assistance into their dependencies, due in part to an awareness that the 'lost' assistance must be elsewhere 'dispersed', and encourage agencies to fashion their assistance to complement or support existing dependencies.

Yet a negative perception of dependency remains, and the aspiration to avoid dependency is a commonplace in writing and discussion about the relation of displaced people to humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, refugee dependency and self-reliance continue to be posited as opposites in both policy and practice (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018). In 2009, for example, UNHCR's Executive Committee said: "promoting the self-reliance of refugees from the outset will contribute towards enhancing their protection and dignity, help refugees manage their time spent in exile effectively and constructively, *decrease dependency* and enhance the sustainability of any future durable solution" (UNHCR ExComm Conclusion no. 104 (LVI), p. 179). [emphasis added] Since then,

protracted situations have continued to lead to the questioning of the sustainability of aid and have also created environments where the displaced themselves need to find ways of moving on (metaphorically, and maybe literally) from aid, since 'solutions' are not readily at hand. It is here that the reality of displacement, the imperative to both provide and cease aid, and the value of dispersed dependencies converge.

### **A short story: an illustrative case in point**

The experience of one of us (Herson) with a joint Oxfam-World Food Programme (WFP) food aid programme in the Red Sea Province (RSP), as it was then, of Sudan in the late 1980s serves as an example of how humanitarians at times misconstrue dependency, and indeed their own role in other ways too. Among the effects of the widespread drought in the Horn of Africa in the mid-1980s was a dramatic reduction of the already generally tough livelihood options of the Beja, Beni Amer and, to a lesser extent, Rashaida inhabitants of RSP. As a result, many of the people who would normally live out their lives spread out around the deserts and *wadis* of the area started to make their way to the main road that runs from Khartoum to Port Sudan through RSP. They were aided in this by the traders whose networks serviced the rural areas, who sent their trucks into the hinterland and brought the people to the roadside, where they settled briefly in camps in which they could receive food assistance.

It was clearly undesirable from all points of view that these normally self-sufficient nomads and semi-nomads should remain displaced and static, and away from their livelihoods. A programme was devised to entice and enable them to return to their normal areas by providing them with food at a large number of 'distribution points' all across the Province where they could access food drops. This became formalised as 'Food For Recovery', a five-year programme of food distribution based on the idea of supporting people while the animals they depended on recovered their numbers, or more specifically meant to indirectly help their herds recover by enabling people to kill or sell fewer animals. There was a longer time commitment than was usually possible to negotiate and a reasonably well-developed system for ensuring that the food went to those who were intended to benefit from it in the intended quantities.

The closure of the programme was implemented over a period of about a year, gradually decreasing the number of recipients and the quantities distributed. At the end we conducted a survey to discover the effects of the distribution, and of its ending. It became apparent that the gradual cut,

with ample notice, gave the opportunity for the recipients to send some of the food trucked out to the scattered distribution points back to the few small towns – in fact to the traders who had facilitated the movement of people from where they had been failing to survive to the roadside camps. Indeed, it became clear that some such movements, although not on a grand scale, had also occurred earlier, despite the efforts of the field teams and the other elements of the monitoring system to ensure that the food “went to those it was intended for”.

This return of some of the food was initially seen by Oxfam as diversion of food aid and thus as a failure of sorts: the food was destined to help those who had suffered the effects of the drought to ‘recover’. They did not, by definition, include those referred to at the time as ‘merchants’. Above we referred to them as ‘traders’, because that was their economic role. While it is true that on the whole they were better-off than the majority of the people and therefore not in need of food assistance, the use of the word ‘merchant’ in the programme carried the disapproving tang of exploitation and is an instance of the unhelpful unconscious thinking of us external assisters in respect of their actual role in the society. The supposed beneficiaries had had long enough exposure to the food programme to be well aware that we would look askance at – and while the distributions were ongoing attempt to prevent – such ‘diversion’. The explanation that was repeatedly given to us was that the traders had put their own resources into assisting the people at the start of the crisis, they had sent out their trucks and saved many thousands of people from the fate that awaited them in the remote areas, and this was the repayment. The reasons that the recipients of the food aid had repaid them was, at least in part, to ensure that they could rely on that relationship of dependency again in the inevitable likelihood that another food crisis would occur. This was a realistic transaction, giving up some of their immediate benefit in recognition of a longer-term relationship and assurance of future benefit.

We, the agencies, had undertaken anthropological studies of the society but had not analysed until then the role of the towns in the local pastoralist economy nor given thought to why the ‘merchants’ had acted as they did beyond assuming their altruism and projecting on them a humanitarian motivation. We had placed ourselves not only outside but in a sense against this important dependency relationship when we insisted that none of the food we distributed could go to traders in the towns who were rich enough not to need food aid.<sup>v</sup> If we had instead seen ourselves as attempting to fulfil a (temporary) role in plugging a gap in the range of dependencies of people whose welfare we were addressing, we might then have taken a more nuanced view of our self-appointed role saving lives and livelihoods, and adjusted our actions along with our attitudes.

Ironically, we took for granted the support of the communities for their own members, when we might instead have found ways to better align ourselves to it.

### **How do displaced people try to create and re-create dependencies in their new locations?**

The Beja were only displaced for a short time, although the involvement of a dependency relationship in that displacement was significant both before and after the programme. The following sections further explore themes raised here through discussing the dispersed dependencies that displaced people create and recreate after flight.

Forced displacement is generally described as a physical dislocation – literally a taking or moving out of place – with its concomitant trauma. Displaced people are then seen as in need of a new place to be in safety. We can, however, translate the whole experience, possibly more usefully, into the terms of dependencies. What people had in their former lives was an existing – maybe good and complete, maybe unsatisfactory – set of dependencies; with their dislocation they lose some of these. Some are obvious – the support of their local government or the place for their children's education, their local shop or their plot of land, a home to relax in and to share time with friends and family. All these, and more, are losses that may leave them with *too few* dependencies that they can rely on. This is an important part of the trauma of displacement.

In their new environment people naturally attempt to retain, re-create or reconstruct their dependencies. Remaining with family, for example, is a natural form of maintaining interdependencies. It may be harder to re-form wider systems of dependency, such as economies on a local scale, and some dependencies perhaps don't 'translate' easily into the new environment and the new community people find themselves in. Here we overview four types of dependencies that refugees and other forced migrants might create or re-create with different actors and institutions in their new location and how humanitarian aid may disrupt these ties.

*Between displaced people*



The existing relations between people, such as members of a family or community who become displaced together, may change substantially after flight.<sup>vi</sup> In situations where people must quickly mobilise to create livelihoods and form social connections, it makes sense that they might first be drawn to people who share their language or place of origin. In a camp or an urban setting, displaced people may create what is known as ‘bounded solidarity’ (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993), essentially ways of living and areas of activity in which members of a particular displaced community operate in partial isolation from a host community. In the case of refugees, this might take the form of selling goods such as national delicacies to refugees of the same nationality, or creating a refugee church.<sup>vii</sup> 93% of refugees in Ugandan settlements, for example, buy their daily goods from refugees of their own nationality, and 90% also buy them from refugees, but of another nationality (Betts et al. 2012). Forced migrants with family or contacts in better economic positions elsewhere may rely in part or in full on remittances, a phenomenon now well researched (Lindley, 2007, 2009; Horst, 2008; Jacobsen et al., 2014).

Work on community-based protection (Cotroneo and Pawlak, 2016) and self-protection (Baines and Paddon, 2012) discusses the many ways that displaced people support each other and themselves in times of conflict. The Baddawi refugee camp in northern Lebanon has historically held mainly Palestinian refugees, who now often welcome and help ‘new refugees’ – Syrians, with whom they share both refugee status and personal stories of displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015a). Ongoing research in East Africa documents the multiple formal organisations and informal groups refugees themselves have created to assist each other, including through language classes, livelihoods training, and the creation of emergency shelters (Easton-Calabria, 2016). In Colombia displaced people have, for many reasons, tended to gather into *barrios* where other IDPs are already living. Such examples are familiar wherever there is displacement.

The provision of humanitarian assistance itself can cause or exacerbate the disruption of existing social relations amongst displaced people – both accidentally and deliberately. Assistance can act for example as a social equaliser through offering the same food rations or housing to all members of a population, regardless of former status. The provision of such forms of assistance can have positive effects, such as enabling women to have more influence in households and their community (Hyndman and de Alwis, 2009) but also limit the ability of previous community leaders to help others. A study on resettled Somali women in Australia, for example, found that these women believe that income equality among Somali refugees “results in the depletion of networks of support and social capital” (McMichael & Manderson, 2004, p. 95). Granted, the social disruption that equal

assistance or targeted assistance to women brings to a patriarchal system might be an intentional act and part of a wider strategy by international organisations to promote gender parity, for example. As these examples demonstrate, both displacement and humanitarian assistance can disrupt or (re-)create dependencies between displaced people with varying outcomes.

### *Displaced people and local people*

A long and ongoing discussion in respect of assistance to displaced people, and in regard to refugees in particular, is the need to avoid their being 'burdens' on host states and host communities, partly in order to avoid or defuse intercommunal tensions. Traditionally, the alleviation of potential burdens has occurred through development funding to host states, infrastructure projects in refugee-hosting regions, and a range of other humanitarian programmes that, in the more enlightened cases, address both refugees and their local hosts. Comparatively neglected is discussion of how refugees and locals can form mutually positive reciprocal relationships. More recently this has been explored through highlighting the economic benefits that refugees can bring to host countries. Research on refugees and hosts in Tanzania in the 1990s, for example, found that Tanzanians employed refugees as a source of labour, sometimes even hiring them during slow seasons when their work was not explicitly needed (Whitaker, 2002, p. 341). More recent research on refugees in Uganda found that 43% of urban refugees are employed by Ugandans (Betts et al., 2012, p. 19). Refugees thus often find an employer within their hosts, thereby perhaps meeting a need previously met within a prior dependency relationship.

But displaced-host dependencies extend beyond the economic—displaced people become trusted neighbours to leave children with, friends with whom to practice new languages, even people with whom to form community organisations. Many displaced people develop relations with their hosts, often using existing contacts, but also creating relationships with new neighbours, landlords, shopkeepers, etc. This wider phenomenon of people, institutions, and communities in the Global South helping each other rather than relying on Western support is an element in what has been termed 'South-South humanitarianism' and is an overlooked yet integral part of the story of humanitarian assistance, particularly within situations of displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015b).

Undermining or ignoring assistance provided by local organisations comprising displaced people or hosts is one example of how international humanitarian action may disrupt local potential or actual dependencies acting as systems of assistance. Findings from a 2018 Oxfam consultation of refugee-

led and other civil society organisations in refugee-hosting countries found that local organisations continue to be neglected in policymaking and other decision-making processes surrounding refugees (International Refugee Congress, 2018). Other challenges occur when organisations are recruited solely as implementers of international organisations' projects. The Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development, a Jordanian NGO that provides legal aid to refugees, details the challenges that have arisen through receiving international funding:

This reliance [on funding from Western governments and their network of development agencies and international relief entities] has come at a great cost. In many instances, it has undermined the operating efficiency, reach and collective strength of local NGOs and Civil Society Organisations; including serving to encourage national and local organisations to isolate themselves from each other, creating quasi-capitalist mindsets competing for the money and "business" of donor governments and their international NGO partners. (ARDD, 2017)

In other cases, humanitarian agencies fail to engage with existing local assistance. Refugee-led organisations in Kampala, Uganda, for example, offer activities to foster refugee self-reliance and local integration, and often provide crucially needed or helpful assistance (Easton-Calabria, 2016). However, they are often locked out of formal humanitarian assistance due to their small size, inability to meet stringent auditing requirements, or the international humanitarian structure itself, which often gives preference to large-scale and ready-made 'solutions' over heavily contextualised and smaller-scale programming.

#### *Refugees and host states*

Equally, the refusal of a host state, for a variety of plausible political reasons, to provide refugees or IDPs with such basics as identification cards, health services, or legal recourse is a serious gap in the infrastructure of dependencies that displaced people need in order to make a sustainable life. Pakistan, for example, hosts well over a million refugees (UNHCR, 2016a), the majority of whom have been in the country for 30 years or were born there; yet Pakistan offers no path to citizenship. Many other countries such as Kenya restrict refugees' right to work and freedom of movement: such examples demonstrate how host states fail to address the gaps in the patterns of dependency that are theirs alone to fill. UNHCR warns that the global number of stateless people will continue to rise as a result of refugee children born in exile, who for a variety of factors may be unable either to

inherit their parents' citizenship or to become naturalised in their host country and thus obtain the benefits of citizenship (UNHCR, 2016b).

In the Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda, a country which provides almost a full set of rights to displaced people, refugees have repeatedly stated that the Government of Uganda "has given peace and land" – something which their own countries had not provided. Although it was UNHCR and international NGOs that offered material assistance, it was the Ugandan government which offered rights akin to the restoration of the state-citizen contract. Refugees are able to move freely, acquire land, and largely live without fear of violence. In these and other ways, refugee-host state relations can replicate former official dependencies, although this happens in few cases.

State aid to displaced people can also have negative consequences, and only a very charitable view would be that assistance is not often seen by states as an opportunity deliberately to disrupt social systems in order to manufacture greater political control, especially in the case of internal displacement. Just as humanitarian agencies face constraints that have led to their promotion of camps for displaced people, so too states may have legitimate reasons apart from political manipulation. However, the fact remains that by not taking into account the desirability of retaining or supporting previously existing dependency structures, assistance can have a damaging disruptive effect on the lives of those who are meant to be benefitting. This may be particularly true when it is a host state or one's own country causing the disruption, as people may have no other authority to turn to for recourse.

#### *Displaced people and humanitarian agencies*

A 2017 UN-OCHA report states that 101.2 million people in countries around the world are considered to need to benefit from humanitarian aid (UN-OCHA, 2017). This number has risen almost consistently over the past decade – the same time period in which there has been an increased emphasis on concepts such as 'self-reliance', 'resilience' and 'localisation'. The irony here is that many actors in the humanitarian system seek to provide aid but nearly simultaneously seek to reduce it. In the terms of this article, the dependence displaced people might expect to be able to have on humanitarian assistance is therefore inherently tenuous.

Yet, as funding pleas and news coverage often demonstrate, newly arrived refugees in host countries often do experience an element of dependence on humanitarian assistance. They may

arrive malnourished in countries that struggle to feed their own citizens, such as arrivals of Somalis into Ethiopia in 2017 (UNHCR-WFP, 2017). In others, their only means of obtaining an identity card to access other services comes from UNHCR. Humanitarian assistance can therefore fulfil many important functions – acting as an emergency lifeline for basic needs, a “surrogate state” (Slaughter and Crisp, 2009), and sometimes as a political advocate for displaced people (Redmond, 2005).

Given the uncertainties surrounding humanitarian assistance, which do not need rehearsing here, it would be unwise for displaced people to depend too much on it, and unwise of agencies to promise or even offer to be dependable. A survey on refugees’ priority needs in Iraq, for example, found that 50% of the refugee population did not feel that their needs were met at all by the services they received (Ground Truth Solutions, 2018). In practice, agencies’ response to limited capacities is to triage needs by targeting – children, women, the disabled or elderly are set up as privileged categories for receiving assistance, thus reducing the overall demand or load. Alternatively, the demand is commonly reduced by an acceptance on the part of agencies that less can be provided than would meet people’s actual or supposed needs.

We suggest a third way that is less a recourse than a rational and constructive approach. This would be to look for the gaps in people’s multiple and dispersed dependencies and target assistance at those gaps, and in such a way as to enable the recipients to maximise their chances of finding ways to substitute other means of meeting those needs as rapidly as possible – thus also releasing humanitarian actors from having unfulfillable aims or no strategy for disengaging.

Indeed, the instability or unreliability of humanitarian aid does not go unnoticed by aid recipients (actual or potential): numerous studies have found that displaced people or those in conflict are often more likely to utilise existing dependencies, even exploitative ones, in times of need rather than depend on humanitarian aid (Harvey and Lind, 2005, pp. 35-37). This raises the question of whether humanitarian recipients sometimes prefer or choose to rely on a social system that is part of a network of dependencies rather than on aid, or, as in the case of the Beja, accept less benefit in order to maintain useful dependencies. The supposition is that aid is not tethered to a society they are part of or rely on, in the sense that they can both have a continuing – and possibly personal – relationship to it, and have some measure of agency or control over how that dependency operates.

The Beja story illustrates that, despite the limited or short-term nature of aid and people’s reliance on other dependencies, these wider networks of dependency both are recognised by affected

people as important to maintain and often go unacknowledged by humanitarian actors. This is problematic for multiple reasons and in certain situations risks becoming dangerous and unethical. This can be especially true in artificial contexts such as refugee camps, which are often cut off from local resources which might replace previous dependencies. Some conflict-affected communities in remote areas of Colombia in the 1990s (and maybe over a much longer period) seemed to understand this and refused humanitarian assistance, and even the presence of humanitarian actors, unless they operated on the terms set by the communities.

There is a bigger discussion here that pervades the humanitarian community about whether humanitarian assistance is just to 'save lives' or should seek to change societies. Is it our business to decide if those Beja traders have an exploitative relationship with their customers and then decide how we will respond to them? Or do we just work towards 'recovery' and allow potentially unequal yet interdependent relationships to persist? Ferguson (2013) argues the importance of dependency relationships, stating, "In a context where material inequalities are staggering[ly large] and social obligations binding the haves to the have-nots are ... shed, we may be wrong to worry so much that those with resources will extend patronage to those who lack them. The greater danger may well be that they will not." Regardless of intent, the result of providing humanitarian assistance can be the disruption of social systems often born of longstanding and enduring relationships, as the Beja story illustrates.

### **Dependency and coping**

Given the discussion raised in the previous sections, how might humanitarians utilise the idea of dispersed dependencies to better support the ability of displaced people to have reliable dependencies? What form(s) of dependency could be prioritised, promoted, or discouraged? In effect, how might humanitarian assistance be used to replace, restore, and strengthen ruptured or lost dependencies?

Seeing humanitarians' place *within the set of dependencies* of disaster-affected and displaced people has the potential to induce a healthy humility about agencies' place in their lives. Logically, behind the concerns about dependency caused by assistance is the idea that this assistance forms a significant part of the coping strategy of the people being assisted. This may be true, and in some circumstances certainly is. But looking at the various dispersed dependencies of disaster-affected people will clarify whether the assistance is too little to be helpful, is worthless to its recipients, or is

inappropriate, and action can be changed, maintained, or stopped accordingly. Indeed, such an analysis may lead to humanitarian organisations sometimes acting as ‘facilitators’ rather than ‘providers’ of assistance through linking displaced people to existing services and expertise. For example, humanitarian agencies’ more recent focus on micro-finance provision to refugees, who are largely denied access to host country financial institutions, can be seen as a way in which humanitarian assistance has sought to restore a previous dependency, in this case a dependency on national banking institutions or the reliance on family or friends for capital. However, UNHCR’s initial failure to implement successful micro-finance programmes suggests that humanitarians were not best placed to fulfil this prior dependency (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2016). UNHCR’s subsequent incorporation of refugees’ access to host country financial institutions in its 2014-2018 Global Livelihoods Strategy can be understood as a humanitarian effort to disperse dependencies and decrease reliance on humanitarian aid.

To identify dependencies and their degree of dispersal, George Kelly used ‘dependency matrices’, grids that tabulated individuals’ needs and where they sought to have them met. He was interested in individuals’ social and emotional needs but there is no reason why a similar approach could not be taken to explore and tabulate social and physical needs at population level.<sup>viii</sup> While there is a mechanical aspect to this exercise, once the list of needs has been agreed between the troubled person and psychologist, or displaced persons and aid agency, such tables do have the benefit of *showing in visual form* the gaps in people’s ability to get their needs met. For example, they could show where there are no available dependencies, the possibly risky concentrations of dependency and thus potentially a point of vulnerability, and the areas of availability of relatively rich sets of dependencies. The result of this exercise illustrates how much healthier a pattern of widely dispersed dependencies is and how much more fragile a set of dependencies with concentrations or gaps looks. This type of matrix could act as a template for similar assessment of the dispersed dependencies of people displaced or affected by disaster. By including people’s social and emotional as well as material dependencies and needs, it would be possible to see how even the time-honoured physical sectors for humanitarian intervention relate to a more complete picture of people’s lives. Such matrices could be tailored towards intended interventions by being constructed at the individual, family, group or population level. Humanitarian practitioners would of course have to adapt such matrices to the specific situation: to pre-determine a precise format and a list of needs is contrary to the context-specific nature of the methodology, which requires the involvement of the subjects of the matrix, in itself a significant advantage of using this technique. As we stated above, in

this respect humanitarians with an interest in beneficiary consultation would find much that is familiar in the ideas of Kelly.

In Kelly's world, as we would argue in ours, the more dispersed dependencies are – and in that maybe counter-intuitive sense, the more dependent people are – the better and healthier their situation. Over-dependency on any one source such as humanitarian assistance is of course not healthy; the search for ways to disperse such dependency is an essential step towards avoiding unhealthy dependency without undermining the ability of people to survive and move on. An analysis of the set of affected people's dependencies – their dispersed dependencies – will enable us to see the contributions that they brought with them, that can be reclaimed, that persist through disaster, and that are created in response to a crisis or displacement. In so doing, both the presence and absence of dependencies can act as a guide for programming.

When agencies look at the needs of, for example, displaced minors, especially unaccompanied minors, the approach is that they are defined as dependent people lacking reliable dependencies. Or rather, at the least, the analysis is of whether they have dependencies that, within the context of displacement, are likely to keep them safe and sustain them. Their vulnerability is part of the definition of being a minor, as is their right to protection. It is therefore expected that they will need people and situations that they can depend upon, in the sense in which we are using it in this article. A similar analysis of the vulnerability of displaced adults through the lens of dependencies is no less appropriate.

When a needs assessment is made, one of the issues in shaping a response involves matching the scale of the response to the perceived need. An analysis of the gaps among the totality of required dependencies that can be fully or partially filled by an intervention allows a nuancing of acceptable degrees of dependency. In 1999 Kosovar refugees confined in camps in northern Macedonia (FYROM) had fewer dependency options than their compatriots who had fled to Albania, although the latter was by far the poorer country. The implication was that the former needed a broader range of assistance. The implication more generally is not that assistance leads to dependency, but that assistance exists within a context of dispersed dependencies. This gives a realistic meaning to the idea of self-sufficiency, and allows support for choices in either rebuilding previous dependencies or in looking for viable, possibly new, ones. It will no doubt often support a livelihoods approach, but should ensure that there is no extreme economic version of self-sufficiency implicit in programme planning and implementation.



Much of the above critique features, and for many years has featured, in reviews and evaluations as missing or lacking in programmes: pressure to improve performance in action is to be welcomed and we see the ideas laid out here as contributing both to that pressure and offering some direction for improvement. We see the possibility that, if agencies take on the idea of dispersed dependencies, it will provide a picture within which they can seek roles to provide something that people can be dependent on, which is additional to their other dependencies and which fills necessary gaps. If this approach is shared, it will incidentally be a methodology that will encourage coordination among external agencies: the role of each will be set within a commonly perceived set of contributions to be made to the set of dependencies of those being assisted.

The nature of what is being looked at and looked for is fundamentally different in the turmoil of the acute phase of an emergency and in a time when recovery or rehabilitation is seen as feasible. This means that the acute phase assessment cannot easily act as a baseline for later and ongoing assessments. Basing the early assessment on a framework of dispersed dependencies, however, enables a continuous updating of the assessment. This could overcome at least this aspect of the difficulty in justifying and organising repeated assessment and overcome the unsuitability of an initial assessment to later phases. An original, and then repeated, analysis based on the idea that people naturally have a set of ever-shifting dispersed dependencies can lead organically to the nature of interventions shifting, as the reality changes, to support transitions to recovery.<sup>ix</sup> It is often claimed that an emergency intervention will undermine self-sufficiency as well as any ongoing development programmes which are predicated on stimulating or relying on self-sufficiency. In the later phase of transition to recovery it reappears as an issue over timing and strategy for exiting from a programme. Approaching a humanitarian situation with this mindset from the beginning can help an entire response prepare for an eventual exit and better determine when and how that exit should take place.

Recognising the need for displaced people to depend on formal support beyond that provided by the international humanitarian community can reinforce awareness of the actual roles of local agencies, whether governmental or non-governmental, something that humanitarian actors often do not do well enough. Supporting dispersed dependencies thus aligns well with the explicit current emphasis on 'localisation' within the humanitarian community.<sup>x</sup> For disaster-affected people, local agencies are part of the context "that is beyond [humanitarian agencies'] ability to control or improve, and with which we must do our work. Government and community are simultaneously unavoidable

partners and constraints for us” (Cosgrave and Herson, 2008). At the same time, these are often both the ‘first and last responders’ to conflict or displacement. It seems to us that ‘dispersed dependencies’ gives a meaningful and concrete methodology for working in partnership with southern-based NGOs, for having a sound basis – beyond that of principle – for a substantial proportion of funding to be passed through them, and in particular for providing them with robust organisational support and capacity building. Seeing southern NGOs as a potential element in the set of dependencies of displaced or disaster-affected people alongside other elements, including international agencies, gives a framework within which aspirations to foster more locally led responses, such as those promoted by the Charter for Change initiative, can be secured.

## Conclusion

People’s ability to act is a function of the social and economic resources at their command. The extent to which they can purchase or leverage care for themselves through their set of dependencies—both formal and informal—is what we often call coping. Displaced people and people affected by disasters depend, variously, on themselves, their friends, family and neighbours, hosts, their government, local organisations, international agencies, and more. From them they get, if they are lucky, some or all of the material items, space to live, remittance money, food, shelter, and water they need to survive, be healthy, live with dignity and in safety, and continue or rebuild their lives. Some dependencies (for instance dependency on humanitarian aid) are stigmatised; others (for instance on community) are valued or idealised. By itself, humanitarian aid cannot create independence, but it can act to fill out the set of dependencies that people require, and can then work within a framework that transfers dependencies to where they are sustainable, or support those that are sustainable, thus enhancing capabilities. As Ferguson (2013, p. 237) writes, “[T]he task is not to eliminate dependence but to construct desirable forms of it”.

The overall effect of approaching assistance for displaced or disaster-affected people like this would be to redefine disaster, and in particular displacement, in terms of its effects in radically and rapidly disrupting the patterns of existing (dispersed) dependencies that support people in normal times. This is not at odds with the more conventional definition of a disaster as a state or event beyond the coping capacity of the people involved. In fact, it gives meaning and substance to the idea of ‘coping’ within that definition. And it also places the idea of dependencies as valuable within the context of concepts such as self-reliance, in that it provides a lens to identify the many resources people can

draw on to create sustainable lives. This can break the link between being in need of aid on the one hand, and powerlessness, incapacity, and neediness on the other.

People affected by disasters are suddenly faced with the shaking up of their habitual dispersed dependency system and are forced to make sometimes life-critical decisions about how to deal with and incorporate into their strategies possibly unfamiliar dependencies. The role of the humanitarian system should be to facilitate them in doing this and in the difficult choices that they must make. Dignity, an essential but intangible aspect of humanitarian aid, in part comes through being supported to manage one's dependencies.

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<sup>i</sup> *Anonymised endnote*: Maurice Herson published a short article in *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, July 2012, which inspired this extended article.

<sup>ii</sup> There is a concomitant lack of recognition that reliance on aid systems is in reality a very partial dependency: people generally need more assistance than they receive through the aid system.

<sup>iii</sup> A recent article uses personal construct theory to analyse the Syrian refugee response in Canada (Naffi and Davidson 2016).

<sup>iv</sup> Paul Harvey and Jeremy Lind, *Dependency and Humanitarian Relief: A Critical Analysis*, HPG Report 19, July 2005.

<sup>v</sup> The system for appointing the consignees for the food aid at distribution points – and thus those responsible for its equitable or expected distribution – is beyond the scope of this paper, but 'merchants' were systematically excluded from this role whatever their leadership role in the population group concerned. We didn't trust them, apart from not seeing them as needy.

<sup>vi</sup> In some cases, displaced people create new networks of dependency amongst each other and become the people upon whom others depend. Gaining new dependents after flight may occur, for example, through becoming responsible for sending remittances to those left behind or becoming the head of a household after the death or separation of a family member.

<sup>vii</sup> Both examples from fieldwork in Uganda. Examples of religious sites and practices fulfilling this function are widely found among displaced people, including those who have been resettled.

<sup>viii</sup> See for example explicit cases of compared matrices of dependencies in: Walker, B. (2003) 'Making Sense of Dependency' in *International Handbook of Personal Construct Psychology*, (ed. Fay Fransella), pages 174 and 176.

<sup>ix</sup> The need for repeated assessment, as opposed to a one-off initial assessment and defined programme, has been brought out among other places in the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition Summary Report (2007).

x See <https://charter4change.org/>