Refuge CANADA'S JOURNAL ON REFUGEES REVUE CANADIENNE SUR LES RÉFUGIÉS

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Always the Ideal? Exploring the Risks of Refugee Participation in Research

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ABSTRACT

Researchers in humanitarian settings increasingly encourage refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to participate within broader research processes, beyond solely providing data. However, efforts to increase participation in research may be tokenistic, complicated by the challenges present in humanitarian settings. The assumption that more participation is always good has meant sometimes limited reflection occurs on the challenges associated with such participation. This study explores the possibilities and realities for refugee and IDP participation in research based on interviews with practitioners and academics who conduct participatory research with refugees and IDPs. It discusses lack of consensus in defining participation and explores five risks of participation that challenge the assumption that participation is always desirable and appropriate.

KEYWORDS

participation; refugee; research; methods; humanitarian

RÉSUMÉ

Les chercheurs dans le secteur humanitaire encouragent de plus en plus les réfugiés et les personnes déplacées à l'intérieur de leur propre pays (PDI) à prendre part aux processus de recherche de façon plus large, au-delà de la simple transmission de données. Cependant, les efforts visant à accroître la participation à la recherche peuvent être purement symboliques et compliqués par les défis présents dans les contextes humanitaires. Le postulat selon lequel une plus grande participation est toujours bénéfique a parfois limité la réflexion sur les défis associés à une telle participation. Cette étude se penche sur les possibilités et les réalités de la participation des réfugiés et des PDI à la recherche à partir d'entretiens avec des praticiens et des universitaires qui mènent des recherches participatives avec des réfugiés et des PDI. Elle aborde l'absence de consensus dans la définition de la participation et explore cinq risques liés à la participation qui remettent en question le postulat selon lequel celle-ci est toujours souhaitable et appropriée.

INTRODUCTION

The participation of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in research—beyond being research subjects—has become increasingly important to researchers working in humanitarian settings. Lenette et al. (2019) suggest that participatory research "involves people with direct experience of, or interest in, the topic of study in all or some aspects of the research process" (p. 161). They draw attention to the distinction between using

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a participation "paradigm" in a "holistic" way throughout the research and the use of participatory "methods" (p. 164). Our study draws on this framing, which we also used in a scoping review linked to this study, recognizing the difference between using strategies such as refugees and IDPs participating in research advisory groups/committees or in design, analysis, and feedback processes, and using specific research methods, such as PhotoVoice, which are often labelled as participatory (Lokot et al., 2023).

Humanitarian actors, including international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations actors, local NGOs and other community-based actors, and academic researchers working in humanitarian settings increasingly emphasize the need to centre the perspectives of people with lived experience of displacement within research with refugees and IDPs (Global Refugee-Led Network [GRN] et al., 2022; Ormel et al., 2020; Pincock & Bakunzi, 2021; Potts et al., 2022; Starodub, 2019). In humanitarian settings, participation has been less visible in programming and research due to the time, budget, and response constraints associated with humanitarian emergencies. However, in recent years, greater recognition of colonial, Eurocentric patterns of top-down hierarchies and decision-making, and the push towards decolonizing and localizing the humanitarian sector, have resulted in greater focus on strategies to shift power within programming and research and, subsequently, participation (Milner et al., 2022; Narayanaswamy, 2021; Peace Direct, 2021). However, efforts to enhance refugee and IDP participation in research have sometimes been tokenistic and inconsistent; this is in part linked to the lack of clear framing of what exactly "participation" means. As described in our scoping review, humanitarian actors sometimes use the label "participatory" to describe

activities that are not in reality participatory. In this process, refugees and IDPs may be engaged symbolically without real effort made by researchers to engage them in making decisions within the research process. While humanitarian narratives emphasize that participation is essential, ethical, and important to research, how participation occurs in practice is less clear (Lokot et al., 2023). Amid the fixation on pushing participation as always being a good thing, there has also been insufficient reflection on the challenges and even risks that may be caused by participation. Specifically, we suggest there is lack of reflection on questions such as: Is participation always desirable? Are there contexts in which participation may cause harm?

This study seeks to examine the possibilities and realities of refugee and IDP participation in research. We interviewed 17 practitioners and academics who conduct research with refugees and IDPs and who have sought to promote participation in their research. We explore the tensions and challenges practitioners and academics face when promoting refugee and IDP participation in research. While multiple research participants had lived experience of being a refugee or IDP, the seed funding for this research study did not allow us to conduct research with refugees and IDPs. The findings are divided into two sections. We begin by exploring the lack of clarity among practitioners and academics about what counts and what does not count as participation. While there is no clear consensus on a definition of "participation", we find that researchers find it easier to articulate what participation is **not** rather than what it is. The second section then examines the broader question of whether being participatory is always appropriate, examining the risks and harms that may (inadvertently) be caused by promoting refugee

and IDP participation in research. We explore five such risks, specifically that (a) participatory approaches do not appear to make a difference to people's lives, (b) colonial power hierarchies are reproduced in research purporting to be participatory, (c) refugee and IDP knowledge is viewed as less trustworthy because of positivist approaches to humanitarian research, (d) participation is viewed as the solution to unravelling entrenched power dynamics within refugee and IDP communities, and (e) participation has negative impacts for refugees and IDPs themselves.

We argue that the overarching humanitarian system creates significant limits for how refugee and IDP participation can be realized in research and that pragmatic decisions may need to be made **not** to promote participation in certain settings in order to prevent harm.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Participation as a concept has become more common in the humanitarian sector in recent years (GRN et al., 2022; Janmyr, 2022; Kaga, 2021; Olivius, 2014; Van Brabant & Patel, 2018). While participation is not as long-standing a concept in the humanitarian sector as in international development (Chambers, 1997; Cooke & Kothari, 2001), it has grown in recognition over time. For example, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership's standard (2013) describes participation as critical to humanitarian accountability. The growing importance of participation broadly (for humanitarian programs and not just research) has resulted in participation being termed an "emerging norm" (Milner et al., 2022, p. 567), which may be linked to increased recognition of how racialized, colonial, and Eurocentric approaches are used within the humanitar-

ian sector, and the importance of participation as a means of shifting power (including through decolonization and localization) to local actors and refugees and IDPs themselves (Peace Direct, 2021; Roepstorff, 2020). Colonial power hierarchies specifically have been identified in humanitarian narratives about the need for modernity/progress, within top-down hierarchies of humanitarian decision-making, through the valuing of certain forms of expertise and knowledge over others, and in "white saviourist" notions of rescue (Anderson et al., 2012; Kothari, 2005; Narayanaswamy, 2021; Pailey, 2020; Peace Direct, 2021; Sou, 2022). Humanitarian actors have been criticized for tokenistic "consultation" efforts with refugees and IDPs that do not create sufficient space for their views to be heard (GRN et al., 2022) and for enacting paternalistic and controlling practices over refugee populations based on the assumption that humanitarian actors know best (Barnett, 2011; Harrell-Bond, 1986). Such criticisms are long-standing; Zetter (1991), in his seminal paper on labelling refugees, discussed "the extreme vulnerability of refugees to imposed labels; the importance of symbolic meaning; the dynamic nature of the identity; and, most fundamentally of all, the non-participatory nature and powerlessness of refugees in these processes" (p. 39)—a critique that remains pertinent today.

Against this backdrop, research conducted in humanitarian settings also carries particular criticisms. In humanitarian settings, research (including assessments and evaluations) is conducted not only by academics but also by humanitarian practitioners themselves who may be already working for humanitarian actors as employees or may be contracted as consultants to conduct research. Some humanitarian actors, like international NGOs and UN actors, may also contract "local" teams to collect data based

on research designed, analyzed, and authored by others, which may perpetuate hierarchical decision-making and limit space for local actors to contribute their expertise (Sibai et al., 2019; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019). The positionality and power of those involved in research are often not considered by humanitarian actors; rather, researchers are sometimes problematically positioned as neutral or objective actors in line with "positivist" approaches to research (Haraway, 1988; Lokot, 2022; Potts et al., 2022). Research in humanitarian settings may be motivated by the need to generate evidence, prove that a program is effective, or quantify the numbers of people reached, which can be political and may result in prescriptive ways of understanding change (Eyben, 2013; Merry, 2016). Such research may position community experiences as less valuable than "expert" knowledge (Brun & Lund, 2010; Lokot, 2021) or may perpetuate extractive relationships with refugees and IDPs (Bruno & Haar, 2020).

The "logic" behind promoting refugee and IDP participation in research responds to these critiques of the humanitarian sector. It also draws on academia's longer history of engagement about the need to ensure people who are affected by an issue have influence over research (Bessert-Nettelbeck et al., 2023; Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Lantz, 2001; Ormel et al., 2020; Padilla, 2023). In the humanitarian sector, participation in displacement settings is grounded in the idea that "knowledge about forced displacement must be produced primarily from the standpoint of the most affected people and by those people themselves"—by those with "lived experience" of displacement (GRN et al., 2022, p. 15). Participation in research may thus be a means of correcting the extractive engagement with refugees and IDPs as solely subjects of research, to being rec-

ognized as experts whose "lived experience" is required to not only understand the issue being researched but also inform the design and implementation of the research itself.

It is also important to note that this broader drive towards refugee participation has been argued to be co-opted by humanitarian actors, who have used the language of refugee and IDP participation to legitimize and disguise non-participatory practices in both programming and research (Kaga, 2021, p. 14; Ozkul, 2020, p. 232; Starodub, 2019, p. 167). Participation is also often linked to empowerment—also a troubled concept—and is sometimes intertwined within neoliberal discourses about refugee self-reliance and resilience (Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Olivius (2014) goes further to suggest that efforts to promote refugee participation may be less about reform and more about governing refugees and ensuring their participation fits within the limits of what humanitarian actors feel is acceptable.

The problems with how participation has been implemented in the humanitarian sector more broadly may be due to the lack of clarity on participation itself. There remains no standard definition or framing of what exactly participation means. For research, this has meant the concept is often used carelessly to describe various kinds of research, as we found in a recent scoping review (Lokot et al., 2023). In this paper, we use Lenette et al.'s (2019) framing of participatory research to distinguish between approaches to enhance participation and participatory research methods as we explore the implications of participation in research. Oliveira and Vearey (2020) suggest that participatory research is a "powerfully seductive" concept underpinned by the assumption that such research is "less intrusive" or automatically more ethical than other research (p. 219). Ozkul (2020) similarly observes the "glori-

fication" of participatory methods as the solution to complex power dynamics, suggesting that the use of certain methods is problematically assumed to make research less extractive and more equitable (p. 232).

Within literature on participation more broadly, emphasis is often placed on how participatory approaches enable the tackling of power hierarchies (Chambers, 1997). However, scholars have long critiqued the "fictional" distinction between local and international actors within humanitarian discourses about participation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Gidron & Carver, 2022, p. 6). Now, there is greater recognition that the concept of "local" is not homogenous (Women's Refugee Commission [WRC], 2021, p. 13) but that power needs to be considered more carefully and more critically. Pincock and Bakunzi (2021) suggest power dynamics within communities have been insufficiently emphasized and that the multiple levels of power operating within refugee communities need to be better understood. This includes consideration of gendered power dynamics, which have often been assumed to be tackled simply because women are included in activities (Cornwall, 2003). These broad critiques about the need to consider power have direct implications for research conducted in humanitarian settings. Specific to research, the common assumption that researchers have all the power and participants have none—which can also be patronizing to the agency of research participants—has been criticized (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 224). While power has been central to conceptualizations of refugee participation, the extent to which power has been analyzed is limited.

While using participatory methods and approaches may appear appealing, actually implementing these within research creates new tensions and conflicts (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 220). As such, refugee and IDP participation remains poorly implemented (Janmyr, 2022). Research participants have highlighted how humanitarian actors have failed to create meaningful opportunities for refugees and IDPs to participate in decision-making (Anderson et al., 2012). The urgency of the humanitarian response is sometimes used as a justification for humanitarian actors being unable to be more participatory—however, as Potts et al. (2022) note, this argument lacks coherence when most refugee crises are protracted rather than short-term. Cooke and Kothari, in their landmark text **Participation: The New Tyranny?** (2001), argue that efforts to be participatory are often merely rhetorical, without transforming power relations. While some efforts are made to engage refugees and IDPs, these attempts to promote participation are often inconsistent (Anderson et al., 2012). The knowledge and expertise held by refugees and IDPs is often reduced to tokenistic, tick-the-box efforts to include them (WRC, 2021, p. 20). Humanitarian actors have also been criticized for "more exploitative than emancipatory" efforts to engage refugees and IDPs (Davis, 2007, p. 23). Research done under the guise of refugee participation is often still positivist rather than being grounded in the lived experience of people affected by displacement (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 223). The overarching power dynamic between those giving and those receiving aid means that researchers sometimes engage with participants with a sense of entitlement, which can result in refugees and IDPs feeling pressured to participate in research (Potts et al., 2022, p. 2541).

These challenges and limitations to whether research processes are actually participatory are a function of inequitable institutions and structures within the humanitarian system (Kaga, 2021, p. 245). Insufficient

and short-term humanitarian funding, for example, acts as a critical barrier to meaningful refugee participation (GRN et al., 2022). These structural constraints raise broader questions about the benefits and possibilities of participatory approaches to research. As Yoshihama and Carr (2002) write, the assumption within the literature is "the more participation, the better"; however, they suggest the need to reflect on some critical questions: "Is participation all good? And is more always better? Beyond the question of feasibility, is participation desired all the time?" (p. 96). Kaga (2021) similarly questions "whether refugee participation is even possible in all contexts" and suggests that the commitments to promote participation may be inevitably limited by the structures and systems within the humanitarian sector and the refugee regime itself that resists opportunities for refugee voice and engagement (p. 254). This study thus explores the possibilities and realities for refugee and IDP participation in research.

METHODS

In total, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted from August to November 2022. Interviewees were practitioners or academics who were purposively selected based on their experience conducting research with refugees and IDPs using participatory approaches. Academics tended to have experiences as practitioners themselves, and all academics conducting research with refugees/ IDPs worked with humanitarian actors in conducting their research. Interviewees were identified through three approaches: by author ML based on her existing networks, from a scoping review that was also part of this research, and through online Facebook groups for humanitarian practitioners. Although the intention was to speak only to interviewees who conduct gender equality

and gender-based violence research, due to challenges in identifying interviewees, two participants did not specifically focus on gender equality or gender-based violence but reflected more broadly on human rights and health issues for refugees and IDPs. Importantly, representing a limitation of this study, we conducted this research only with practitioners and academics, not refugees and IDPs. Although three interviewees had previous lived experience of being refugees or IDPs and reflected on their own experiences of displacement, the funding for this study was for only a small scoping research project, with a limited budget and a short time frame, which did not allow us to meaningfully engage with refugees and IDPs.

Overall, six interviewees identified as practitioners, six were academics, and five described themselves as practitioner-academics. In total, ten interviewees were based in humanitarian settings, and seven were not. By region, five interviewees were based in Africa, three in Asia, two in the Middle East and North Africa, and the remaining seven were based outside of humanitarian settings, specifically in countries in Europe, North America, and Australia. All interviewees identified as women or non-binary, except one, who identified as a man. Table 1 outlines interviewees' characteristics by geography and type of interviewee.

Interviews were conducted by ML using Zoom, based on a semi-structured topic guide that explored definitions and framings of refugees' and IDPs' participation, strategies and methods used to promote refugee and IDP participation in research, motivations for promoting participation, power hierarchies affecting participation, refugee and IDP reactions to participatory strategies and methods being used, negative and unintended impacts of participation, and lessons learned. In total, 12 interviews were transcribed by a

Table 1

Characteristics of Interviewees (Geography and Type of Interviewee)

Type	Africa	Asia	Middle East and North Africa	Europe, North America, and Australia
Practitioner	2	3	1	
Academic	1		1	4
Practitioner-academic	2			3
Total	5	3	2	7

transcription company, and the remaining 5 were transcribed using the automated transcription function in Zoom. Data were analyzed thematically by ML through inductive and deductive coding using NVivo software. Interviewees were invited to share feedback on the findings during a workshop at the end of January 2023, which six of the interviewees chose to join. All interviewees were sent slides from the feedback workshop for review. Ethical approval to conduct interviews was received from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

In this paper, we attribute the contributions of interviewees using the regional location in which they were based. We recognize this terminology is sometimes contested and does not always fully represent the multiple overlapping identities people hold, including how individuals may work in regions different from where they are originally from or may travel frequently outside their region. We have not attributed content by gender or type of interviewee to avoid identifying individuals.

This paper is also informed by the authors' own experiences as humanitarian workers and/or researchers, including challenges in trying to conduct research differently in ways that centre the perspectives of people closest to the issue.

FINDINGS

The findings begin by outlining the broader confusion among practitioners and academics about what counts as participation, as this ambiguity often frames the risks and harms related to participation. The second section of the findings then delves more deeply into the broader question of whether being participatory is always appropriate, examining the risks and harms that may (inadvertently) be caused by promoting refugee and IDP participation in research.

What Counts as Participation?

Across interviewees, there was recognition of the problems with the "lack of an established definition" (Interview 4) for refugee and IDP participation. One interviewee commented, "People will say, 'We stand for refugee participation' or 'We encourage refugee participation.' But when it comes to what this means in practicality, it's not very clear" (Interview 16). Participation has become a "sexy" concept used to "legitimiz[e] work that isn't necessary participatory" (Interview 1) or, even further, "to disguise non-participatory practices" (Interview 3). Whether there is real intent to change practice was also discussed: "I don't think all organizations or researchers are really keen to really give away the control or the power over their work" (Interview 1).

Interviewees discussed a "disconnect between what we assume is participatory" and

what participation actually means (Interview 6). They discussed how descriptions of research may use the term "participatory" but research may not be truly participatory. Even among interviewees, some common practices within the humanitarian sector that may be considered normal practice were mentioned as examples of participation. For example, merely the act of conducting interviews with refugees with disabilities was stated as a positive example of refugee participation (Interview 11) instead of normal practice. Another participant discussed how their doctoral research being implemented and co-designed by a local actor was an example of refugee participation; however, they also acknowledged the benefit that they received from this dynamic was quite different from the local researcher's benefit (Interview 15). The complications of a local actor conducting research under the direction of someone else may mean this type of dynamic requires further scrutiny.

Many interviewees had more concrete idea about what participation is **not**:

> [I]t wouldn't be enough to invite a refugee to a meeting, ask them to tell their story, and then get to the business of making decisions after they leave. For participation of refugees to be meaningful, it needs to be substantive, it needs to be sustained, and it need to have the potential to affect outcomes. (Interview 4)

One interviewee described participation as "more than just being consulted" (Interview 2). Merely including refugees or IDPs in research was seen as different to participation (Interview 10). Focus group discussions were discussed by a few participants as being a method labelled as participatory simply due to being more interactive. One interviewee critiqued this description as automatically participatory:

> [I]f your idea of participation is focus groups … I don't want to use the word "alarm", but it's like a

call to really stop and explore what participation is. Because a focus group, if done well, it can be a good conversation, but a lot of them aren't even done well. But often it is largely so one-way, and one-off, and not really engaging people in the, talking together about the, what is the problem and how do they want to address it, and what actions do they want to take to resolve it. … A focus group is not participation. (Interview 3)

Interviewees also raised broader concerns about whether a research agenda imposed onto a setting can really be participatory (Interview 15) and also questioned whether their own practices using creative methods like photography and video may still involve researchers making choices that didn't align with participant wishes. One interviewee discussed how a research participant made a video showing very striking visuals of poverty in their neighbourhood, but the researcher felt the video was "stigmatizing" and decided not to use it (Interview 1), complicating the idea that refugees make decisions about outputs. Another interviewee made the decision not to use a particular photo to ensure research participants' safety, describing a clash between "ethics of care" and the wishes of research participants (Interview 8).

Is Participation Always Appropriate?

In multiple interviews, an important question emerged: Is participation always appropriate? While many participants stressed the benefits of increasing refugee and IDP participation within the research process, others felt participation required "a good reason" or it would become "tokenistic" (Interview 4). The rationale or motivation for promoting refugee/IDP participation became a key issue: "I think we really need to question why we want to do participation, why we value participation at all" (Interview 3). One interviewee discussed whether the ethical imperative to use participatory processes would actually result in better knowledge:

I think ethically it sounds like a really good idea to co-produce knowledge with those that are most vulnerable … but then it's often, what would it mean to really do that? And will it necessarily lead to knowledge, better knowledge that will be more helpful? (Interview 2)

Others focused on the practical implications of being participatory, suggesting that in certain contexts, pushing for a participatory process may simply not be "practical," yet researchers sometimes try to "force" or "squeeze" it into their projects (Interview 15). The fact that refugee participation is a "hot topic" may result in "symbolic attempts at participation" that do "more damage than good" (Interview 4).

During interviews, participants discussed five main risks or harms that may result from efforts to promote refugee and IDP participation in research. These are discussed below.

Participatory Approaches Do Not Appear to Make a Difference—And Refugees and IDPs Recognize This

The first risk of refugee and IDP participation is that participatory approaches do not appear to make a difference to people's lives—and this perception is made not just by researchers but also by refugees and IDPs themselves. A few participants discussed how refugees know when efforts to engage them are meaningful or tokenistic. One interviewee commented, "I think people have a really good bullshit radar, so they know when they're just being used and when it's just a tokenistic, illustrative purpose" (Interview 3). Another interviewee recounted her experience of being challenged by a refugee who knew the "script" used by researchers:

I ended up interviewing the same woman twice for two different studies, and she recognized me immediately … "Oh, look! It's you! You're back!" And I said, "Yes," and she goes, "Okay, let's start. Give me your speech," and I go, "What do you mean?"

She goes, "Give me your speech about how you're here to hear our voices, and how you want my input in your study and all of that." And I realized that I even had a similar script to the script that I had the first time, because our organization has a standard script that it would read before we would conduct this research, and she goes, "You know what I would have appreciated … if you told me what the outcomes of that last study were. I mean you came in. You interviewed me for like an hour, and then I never saw you again. … But I mean what happened with the study? What were the recommendations?" … And it really resonated with me for the longest time that yeah, I mean, I come and I interview her, and I tell her her voice matters, and then I take all of this, and I go, and I produce the study where I write a paper, and I get promoted, and this person doesn't know what happened with the input she gave me. (Interview 6)

Refugees and IDPs, especially those who are fatigued from over-research, may be particularly cynical about whether participatory research will make a difference to their lives. One interviewee described how IDPs were "completely fed up" of continually being part of exercises without any changes occurring: "They were like, 'We don't want to draw any more timelines, community maps"' (Interview 1). Another commented that communities were wondering, "Who's really benefiting from this?" (Interview 17). An interviewee commented on research done at the start of the Syria crisis, observing that during this period, refugees were "hopeful" that the research could help them and were more willing to engage with researchers than they were later: "They've seen no results tangibly from all these studies that they've participated in, or they can't connect the dots of how this is really impacted them or improved their situation" (Interview 6). Researchers have sometimes overpromised about the potential impacts of participatory approaches and when these impacts will be realized. Among groups that have experienced trauma, it can be "dangerous" to

suggest their lives will be improved by their participation (Interview 8).

The risk that efforts to promote participation fail to make a difference in people's lives has real consequences for refugees and IDPs who are constantly asked to participate in studies. Trust may be eroded between researchers and participants if participatory approaches are perceived as merely illustrative or non-impactful. Data generated may also lack depth if refugees and IDPs are exhausted by demands to participate.

The Extractive Processes Associated With Humanitarian Research Might Reproduce Colonial Power Hierarchies

The second risk of refugee and IDP participation is that the extractive processes underlying humanitarian research may reproduce top-down, colonial power hierarchies even within participatory research processes. During interviews, participants discussed how participation may be "part of the decolonial project" (Interview 3), exploring how the humanitarian system has perpetuated colonial power dynamics and standards and how participation links to broader efforts in the sector around decolonization and anti-racism.

Despite the intent to use participatory processes, the way humanitarian research is structured does not always leave space for refugee and IDP participation: "The way that research projects are kind of conceptualized and planned and funded doesn't leave a huge amount of space. … It deters refinement and reiteration of the research questions" (Interview 17). There often isn't time to be participatory:

> There's a call for projects and then you just have to get something ready, often at quite short notice. And that doesn't really give time to go to a community and consult them on what would you want the project to be about. (Interview 1)

Thus, what occurs is engagement of refugees and IDPs much later in the process, when it is too late:

> Too often we are seeing that there's already been, say, a research proposal or an idea or something already created and designed, and they want feedback on that, or they want to consult with refugees after all of that has already been done. And we would say that that is too late. (Interview 4)

Extractive processes may also play out in the requirements placed on refugees and IDPs to give up their time to participate in multiple stages of participatory research processes without being compensated financially: "So we're like, you know, almost demanding something from participants … that they just don't have … time for" (Interview 8). Refugees and IDPs may be "overburdened, underpaid, often not paid at all" (Interview 4). Efforts to be participatory may become "something that engages displaced people to do work for free and burdens them" (Interview 2), equivalent to outsourcing research work without providing payment in recognition that refugees and IDPs are giving up their time. Refugees and IDPs may also feel pressured to participate because a humanitarian actor—who may determine future projects for their community—is asking (Interview 5).

While participatory processes are often presented as a means of challenging unequal power dynamics between researchers and participants, the humanitarian structure itself might mean that efforts to be participatory are set up to fail. When the funding, decision-making, and payment structures surrounding humanitarian research are so restrictive, even participatory processes may become extractive, hierarchical, or even colonial.

Refugee and IDP Knowledge May Be Viewed as Less Trustworthy Because of Positivist Approaches to Humanitarian Research

The third risk of refugee and IDP participation is that refugee and IDP knowledge from participatory approaches may be viewed as less trustworthy because of the positivist underpinnings to research and evidence generation within the humanitarian sector. The principles of impartiality and neutrality are key to humanitarian action; however, interviewees suggested that participatory processes may be seen as "political" and thus "not acceptable" for "objective research" (Interview 7). Interviewees discussed "rejection and hostility" they experienced in the sector when introducing participatory ways of working (Interview 14), as well as questions about whether participatory approaches were "rigorous" and able to provide useful data (Interview 7). The lack of recognition of practice-based research within the humanitarian sector was also discussed as a barrier to refugee and IDP participation (Interview 10).

Alongside these broader questions about clashes between humanitarian principles and data grounded in people's lived experience, interviewees themselves raised questions about the implications of having refugees and IDPs more involved in the research process. Some felt it was a positive way of shifting focus from the "opinions of the researcher" to the "voices of the participants," suggesting it was vital for refugee and IDP voices to be more central instead of researchers making assumptions about what participants mean (Interview 5). Others discussed how more engagement from refugees and IDPs in the research process may result in the topic of research changing (Interview 1). However, participation throughout the research process may also create complications if refugees and IDPs have political agendas or loyalties that may

be perceived by researchers as "threatening" (Interview 2). One interviewee seemed to allude to a broader question about whether refugees and IDPs could be honest or trusted, suggesting that "bias" may affect how refugees and IDPs presented the problems in their communities (Interview 13). However, the suggestion that refugees and IDPs are biased because they are closest to the problem is embedded within a positivist approach to research, which suggests that because a researcher is more distanced from the problem, it means they are more likely to be objective. The positivist bent to research in the humanitarian sector means that efforts to promote refugee and IDP participation may not be so straightforward but may require pushback against ideas about research as objective and participants as biased. For refugees' and IDPs' lived experience to be recognized as valid knowledge, humanitarian actors may need to grapple with fundamental questions about whether refugees and IDPs can be trusted to be part of the research process. It may require more reflection on the role of humanitarian researchers' positionality and power in shaping research.

The Assumption That Participatory Efforts Have Tackled Unequal Power Dynamics Within Communities

The fourth risk of refugee and IDP participation is that we assume our efforts to be participatory have successfully tackled unequal power dynamics within communities. When participation is presented as "the panacea for resolving power" (Interview 8), the assumption may be that promoting refugee and IDP participation means that power has somehow been equalized or shared equitably.

Interviewees emphasized how gender, ethnicity, age, and other power dynamics among refugees and IDPs themselves require

researchers to reflect critically about power even within participatory research processes:

> We need to put aside this idea of getting a perfect representative model, because that doesn't exist. But we can still put every effort into trying to get diverse views and ensuring that we don't fall into the trap of thinking that one group of refugees will speak on behalf of all refugees, because there are so many dynamics to consider as well. (Interview 4)

Interviewees discussed the broader challenge around which refugees and IDPs are chosen to represent their communities. Multiple interviewees discussed the problems with relying on "gatekeepers," suggesting that these actors may not always represent the perspectives of their communities. Peer researchers also may face challenges in how to position and place themselves:

> You're part of the community. It's very easy for everyone to want to speak to you, but at the same time it's also very easy for particular people just want to speak to you, or you feel that they're entitled because you're part of the community in terms of maybe ethnicity. … That creates tension in itself. (Interview 16)

When refugee researchers are positioned as "brokers" or representatives, broader power dynamics may be obscured (Interview 17).

Power dynamics within communities may limit the extent to which participation is realized. For example, women may defer to men in the room and refrain from sharing their own perspectives (Interview 14). Or researchers may inadvertently focus on refugees who are more accessible—those in "the centre" (Interview 12)—or refugees and IDPs with whom they are more familiar, who inevitably speak English and have a longer history of working with humanitarian actors (Interview 17). Refugee and IDPs themselves may not want to disrupt existing power dynamics within communities (Interview 7) or, conversely, may not feel that certain groups who have been chosen to participate

should have the right to share their views (Interview 1).

While participatory processes have a role to play in challenging entrenched power hierarchies that are present within research, they may not always successfully reduce the hold of these power hierarchies. Refugee and IDP representation is challenging and remains an imperfect process. Those who have power and voice within participatory processes may not always reflect the views of the majority.

Participation May Have Negative Impacts on Refugees and IDPs

The fifth and final risk is that refugee and IDP participation can result in negative impacts for refugees and IDPs. It may affect their relationships within displaced and host communities, and their personal experiences may become public knowledge.

Interviewees discussed how refugee researchers may have to deal with gossip and rumours from the community due to their affiliation with the research project (Interview 17). Although external researchers may exit the community, peer researchers remain and may face questions about the project.

Multiple interviewees discussed how participation in research may risk retraumatizing participants, especially refugees and IDPs who have experienced gender-based violence (Interview 15). When topics for research relate to experiences of violence, the risk of harm to research participants is also increased, requiring researchers to ensure appropriate safeguarding (Interview 5). Merely providing referrals to support services like counselling may not be enough without knowing how the service providers will respond to survivors of violence (Interview 10). Poor quality of support services may increase the risk of retraumatization.

Issues around anonymity also need to be managed carefully when working with refugees and IDPs. Interviewees discussed the tension between wanting to acknowledge the important role refugees and IDPs played in participatory processes but also not being "over-zealous" in disclosing their identities (Interview 15). Refugees and IDPs may feel comfortable sharing personal experiences within a participatory group research process. However, for this information to then be shared more widely—for example, in publications or at conferences—has other implications (Interview 8). While some researchers emphasized the importance of centring refugee and IDP perspectives at events such as conferences, others raised the risk that these events "are not necessarily culturally safe spaces," and refugees and IDPs may be exposed to types of critique and questioning they may not be used to and that researchers cannot control: "When I'm inviting someone, I'm taking them into a space that's unfamiliar, not always friendly, sometimes harmful. And what's the purpose of doing that? Why?" (Interview 3).

Participation in research may have unintended negative impacts for refugees and IDPs long after the research has been completed. While the positive impacts of participation have often been used as the rationale for promoting refugee and IDP participation, the reality is that this level of engagement creates real risks for refugees and IDPs who are part of the communities being researched **after** research occurs. Refugees and IDPs may experience harm to their reputations and relationships in communities, increased risk of retraumatization, and, potentially, disclosure of personal information.

CONCLUSION

While the benefits of promoting refugee and IDP participation are often discussed, less

attention has been placed on the inherent challenges of trying to operationalize participation within an inequitable humanitarian system. We suggest that the overarching humanitarian system significantly limits how refugee and IDP participation can be realized. This means participation may not always be possible. Humanitarian actors may have to make pragmatic decisions to **not** promote participation in certain settings and situations in order to prevent harm. Assessing the risks and potential benefits to refugee participation in humanitarian contexts is a formidable challenge, and we suggest that humanitarian discourses about participation need to become more nuanced to respond to this challenge. It should reflect that more participation isn't necessarily better, and that any efforts to promote participation need to be carefully analyzed and considered before being implemented (Kaga, 2021; Yoshihama & Carr, 2002). We build on long-standing critiques of participation, suggesting that at times the rhetoric about participation has overstated how participation may challenge power hierarchies (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Instead, we suggest that tackling power is a more complex and longer-term undertaking (Abu-Lughod, 2013), requiring concerted effort not just within research projects but across the humanitarian structure more broadly. The current momentum towards decolonizing aid and broader recognition of racism and colonialism within the humanitarian sector may provide greater impetus for researchers to reflect on power dynamics and more carefully consider the role of participation in their research.

Our study presents the perspectives only of practitioners and academics about participation—and reflects our own challenges conducting research within institutional and funding constraints. We suggest that future research should draw on research par-

ticipants' experiences to understand what participation means from their perspective and to further interrogate the narrative that more participation is always better.

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