SPA Policy Brief

The Voice of the Voiceless

SPA professor explores how "thin" participation can be leveraged to improve refugee well-being

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the monopolistic, constrained governance structures of refugee camps, displaced populations often lack formal "exit" options or democratic accountability. New work by SPA **Professor Khaldoun AbouAssi** and **Corbin Walls** explores how "thin" forms of participation—specifically awareness of feedback mechanisms and consultative outreach—impact refugees' perceived well-being across individual, community, and institutional levels. Drawing on data from 876 households in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, the findings demonstrate that even minimal engagement can contribute to institutional legitimacy and psychosocial resilience. While consultative participation has a tiered impact across all levels, mere awareness is sufficient to drive improvements in community and institutional perceptions. Policymakers and humanitarian organizations are urged to prioritize transparent communication and proactive consultation as essential tools for governance in constrained environments.





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INTRODUCTION:

THE GOVERNANCE GAP IN DISPLACEMENT

The global displacement crisis has reached unprecedented levels, with millions residing in refugee camps that have shifted from temporary shelters to "durable governance sites." In these environments, the state's role is often supplanted or shared by a complex web of international NGOs, humanitarian agencies, and local administrative bodies. This results in a governance model characterized by high centralization and low accountability. For the refugees living within these camps, the traditional democratic levers of "voice" and "exit" are severely compromised. They cannot leave (no exit) and often have no formal way to influence the policies that govern their daily lives (limited voice).

Research indicates that when individuals feel they have no agency, their psychosocial well-being and trust in institutions decline. In such "monopolistic" service environments, where a single entity or small group of entities controls all aspects of life—from food distribution to security—the need for some form of participation becomes a matter of both human rights and administrative efficiency.

CONCEPTUALIZING PARTICIPATION UNDER CONSTRAINT

"THICK" VS. "THIN" PARTICIPATION

In stable democratic contexts, participation is often categorized into "thick" and "thin" forms. "Thick" participation involves deep engagement, such as deliberative assemblies, co-production of services, and direct involvement in decision-making processes. While ideal, these forms of engagement are often physically, legally, or politically impossible in refugee camps like those in Cox's Bazar. Constraints such as restricted movement, lack of legal status, and the urgent nature of humanitarian aid make "thick" participation a luxury that many administrations cannot afford or are unwilling to implement.

Consequently, the study identifies two primary modes of thin participation:

- **Awareness-Based Participation**: In this latent form of engagement, the individual is aware that feedback mechanisms (e.g., complaint boxes, hotlines, or information desks) exist. Even if they never use the tools, the knowledge of their existence signals that the institution is approachable. This signal is essential for maintaining order and legitimacy within the camp, as it suggests that the "voiceless" have a potential channel to be heard.
- **Consultative Outreach**: This involves formal solicitations of input by humanitarian agencies. In this active, though still "thin," process, refugees are asked for their opinions or feedback on specific services or camp conditions.

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Stakeholder		Rationale
Humanitarian Agencies	Prioritize proactive consultation over passive information sharing.	Consultation initiates a relational exchange that drives individual-level well-being improvements that mere awareness cannot reach.
Camp Administrators	Ensure broad transparency regarding feedback mechanisms.	Even if refugees do not use the channels, knowing they exist bolsters institutional legitimacy and perceptions of community-level progress.
Donors & NGOs	Design gender-sensitive participation frameworks.	Address the "gender paradox" by targeting women in consultations to bridge the gap between their aggregate satisfaction and specific service needs.
Policy Researchers	Investigate the role of intermediaries (e.g., Majhis).	Intermediaries can act as gatekeepers; future policies must ensure they do not distort feedback or entrench existing power imbalances.

FINDINGS

The study utilized a robust dataset from Cox's Bazar––which sufficiently represents monopolistic service markets across refugee camps worldwide––to measure the impact of these forms of participation on perceived well-being, across three levels of perceived improvement: individual, community, and institutional. The following sections detail the core findings and their implications for policy.

THE IMPACT ON SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

The most striking finding is the universal positive correlation between participation and subjective well-being. Refugees who were aware of feedback opportunities reported life satisfaction and well-being levels significantly higher than those who were not. Specifically, awareness alone accounted for a quarter of a standard deviation increase in well-being. This suggests that the psychological benefits of knowing one can speak are nearly as important as the act of speaking itself.

COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY

Participation does not just benefit the individual; it has a systemic effect. The study found that both awareness and consultation significantly boosted refugees' perceptions of their community and the institutions governing them. This is a critical insight for camp administrators: investing in communication and consultation is not just a humanitarian gesture—it is a governance strategy that builds social capital and reduces institutional friction.

THE INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL BARRIER

While awareness is enough to improve community-level perceptions, the study found that it is insufficient to improve individual-level outcomes. This indicates that awareness functions as a general "social glue," but direct consultation is required to address specific grievances or personal needs. Without proactive outreach, the most marginalized individuals may remain aware of the system but still feel neglected by it.

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THE GENDER DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPATION

The research highlighted a "gender paradox." Male refugees were more likely to be aware of and participate in feedback mechanisms than females. However, women who did participate generally reported higher aggregate levels of life improvement and were more critical of specific institutional services. This suggests that women, who often bear the brunt of managing household water, sanitation, and health, have a more nuanced and critical view of service delivery than men. For participation to be truly effective, it must be tailored to capture these specific gendered experiences.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION

Despite the clear benefits, several barriers prevent effective participation in camp settings:

- ***The "Majhi" System***: In many camps, information filters through informal leaders (e.g., the Majhis in Cox's Bazar). If these intermediaries are biased or corrupt, they can block the flow of information and prevent refugees from being aware of feedback channels.
- ***Power Asymmetry***: Refugees may fear that negative feedback will lead to a reduction in aid or other retaliatory measures, silencing "voice" even when channels exist.
- ***Logistical Constraints***: Literacy levels, language barriers, and lack of technology (e.g., cell phones for hotlines) can make even "thin" participation difficult for the most vulnerable.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

How can participation be harnessed to enhance refugee well-being and governance?

1. ***Move Beyond "Information Push" to "Bidirectional Exchange"***: Humanitarian agencies should move from merely providing information (pushing awareness) to active consultation (requesting feedback). Agencies should schedule regular, small-group consultations that bypass hierarchical camp leadership to reach "ordinary" residents.
2. ***Invest in Broad Awareness Campaigns***: Since mere awareness improves community and institutional perceptions, camp administrators should invest in visual and oral communication strategies (e.g., the use of posters, community radio, and "town criers") to educate residents on feedback channels. This builds a foundation of institutional legitimacy even for those who do not actively use the tools.
3. ***Implement Gender-Specific Outreach***: Women navigate the camp environment differently. Gender-sensitize participation frameworks by creating "women-only" consultation spaces and ensuring that feedback mechanisms are accessible within domestic spheres, avoiding the gatekeeping of male-dominated community structures.
4. ***Decouple Aid from Feedback***: To overcome the fear of retaliation, agencies must make clear that aid is entirely decoupled from feedback provided. Using third-party organizations to collect and anonymize feedback can help build the necessary trust.
5. ***Monitor and Evaluate Intermediaries***: Policy must account for the role of intermediaries. Agencies should conduct regular checks to ensure that informal leaders are not monopolizing access to feedback channels. Diversifying the points of contact (e.g., using mobile feedback units) can reduce the power of any single intermediary.

CONCLUSION

Participation in constrained refugee environments is not a luxury; it is a fundamental requirement for effective governance and humanitarian well-being. While "thick" participation may remain out of reach in many contexts, this brief demonstrates that "thin" participation—awareness and consultation—is a powerful tool. By signaling openness and validating the agency of the displaced, humanitarian institutions can foster a more resilient, legitimate, and satisfied population. In the face of protracted displacement, the act of listening is perhaps the most significant aid an organization can provide.