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'We Don't Live in the Future. We Live in the Now'.
How Time Intersects with (UN)realistically Partnering
with and for Refugees in Lebanon
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Abstract

This commentary examines multifaceted conceptions and practices of time in participatory approaches with Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. It critiques UN-centered partnership models, which often prioritize long-term solutions over refugees' immediate needs, and explores the challenges faced by refugee-led organizations in addressing diverse and urgent community priorities. Drawing on Futures Literacy Labs (FLLs) and Trauma-Informed Participatory Approaches (TiPAs), the authors present alternative methods that embrace refugees' complex temporal experiences and prioritize their agency. These approaches create spaces for refugees to engage as active participants, addressing intersectional vulnerabilities and fostering a sense of dignity and resilience. By challenging linear and static notions of time in humanitarian programming, the commentary advocates for solidarity initiatives that respect and integrate refugees' diverse temporalities. Ultimately, it offers insights into how participatory frameworks can be reimagined to better support inclusive and meaningful collaborations in displacement contexts.

Introduction
This commentary delves into multifaceted conceptions and practices of time in participatory approaches with Syrian and Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon. Our exploration brings case studies from humanitarian aid and research methodologies outside of Europe to discussions on intersectional solidarities and resistance. Lebanon's displacement context is marked by intersecting economic, political and security crises. One resident in four in Lebanon is currently Syrian or Palestinian, and the country's currency has lost 95 percent of its value since 2019. As such, this piece stands as a microcosm, illustrating the complexities of solidarity initiatives organized with, by, and for Syrians, Palestinians and citizens in a South-South displacement context.

Our observations of solidarity and aid in Lebanon revolve around contrasting partnership models in humanitarian aid and research. Building on our different participatory research experiences in Lebanon, we underscore in this commentary the possibility of fostering inclusive and impactful solidarity initiatives by unpacking preconceived notions of time. In particular, we argue that intersectional solidarity can be strengthened by actively acknowledging the complexity of experiences of time for human dignity. Rooted in creative and psychologically-informed approaches, we experimented with Futures Literacy Labs (FLLs) and trauma-informed participatory methods (TiPAs). FLLs and TiPAs both build on an understanding of time not just as a linear progression, but a complex interplay of past experiences, present needs, and future aspirations. Positionalities influence conceptions of urgency and our capacity to feel that we can act in the present to shape our futures. The meaning of the future depends on our experiences of the past and intersectional positionalities in the present. Hence, solidarity is going to reproduce violent power relationships if there is no space to embrace, accept and work with multiple temporalities, including feelings of urgency.

In the commentary, we first look at established partnership frameworks of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and discuss the limits of participation and partnership models with refugee-led organizations and networks. We then put these models alongside participatory strategies we have tested as researchers, meaning FLLs and TiPAs. We conclude by discussing whether these participatory methods can be used as alternative models for building partnerships with displaced individuals and families in the humanitarian sector.

Partnering with and for refugees in the humanitarian sector
In the humanitarian space, the UN has experimented with different participatory models. Its limitations have given rise to a narrative that presents refugee-led organizations as the ultimate solution for realistic partnering. In this section, we look at UN-centered participatory models and the limits of refugee-led organizations in turn.

UN-centered participatory models
UNRWA and UNHCR have long-employed participatory approaches in aiding refugee communities, but their partnering strategy falls short when it comes to the effective representation of voices in decision-making processes. Participatory approaches with refugees have pointed to a selection bias of certain refugee groups who according to refugees' own accounts "are favored because they have the story that policy makers and sometimes the UNHCR would like to listen to" and who "do not question things that might disturb policy makers" (Bahram, 2020).

In addition, UN methodologies for representation also fall short of addressing the intricate intersectionalities of the population groups they seek to support. Certain groups or individual refugees may wield more influence, leading to the marginalization of others such as gender minorities and youth (Couch & Francis, 2006; Lokot et al., 2023; Milner et al., 2022). Consequently, limiting participation in decision-making to specific points in time means that UN-centered participatory models fall short in responding to refugees' real needs,

including priorities for the immediate. While the UN system has long been critiqued for being aid- rather than development-centered (Brun, 2016; Calhoun, 2008; Fassin, 2011), both aid-centered and development-centered approaches can serve to complement one another, rather than individually be adopted at the expense of the other. Balancing both approaches, however, requires a finite understanding of the different intersectional needs and perspectives within refugee communities.

According to a Protection Officer at UNHCR, this is "easier said than done". He outlines that while UN agencies have shown intent to involve refugees in decision-making processes, their approaches commonly overlook the nuanced identities and needs within refugee communities. He explains:

> "[...] our capacities are limited, even as large humanitarian organizations and UN agencies. We have been working towards an intersectional approach, and many of us see the need for it. But our inability to do so, is contingent on donor priorities not being in this area, our limited resources, etc. Most of the time, we have to look at the community as a whole, we don't always have the ability to delve into as many details as we want to about the social and cultural aspects of the community".

With regards to time, UN agencies continue to emphasize the need to focus on the long-durée, stressing the need for "sustainable" and durable solutions such as "voluntary repatriation, resettlement and integration" that allow refugees to "rebuild their lives" (UNHCR, 2024), whereby refugees are "included into the existing ecosystem" (UNHCR Iraq, 2024). But what about when the ecosystem itself is not hospitable to this approach? And what if the priority that UN-agencies give to the future over the present is in contrast to how people in displacement situations themselves experience and formulate their needs? As a Syrian refugee from Akkar interviewed for the purpose of this commentary shared:

> "We will die in the now as we wait for the permanent and durable. The long game is not for us. We lose our lives and our livelihoods every day. Every minute a child dies from the cold, from hunger – while our families wait for asylum applications, while they teach us to sew, make jam and plant seeds for what they think will be beneficial for our economic empowerment. What empowerment? When will aid agencies become more practical? When will they ask us what we actually need?" (Male, age: 45, daily laborer, no fixed income, married, two children – entered Lebanon in 2013)

Finally, UN failure to consider power dynamics within refugee communities restricts the genuine representation of voices, including with regards to conceptions and practices of time. UN-centered partnership models tend to frame assistance within fixed temporal boundaries, notably those of their livelihood activities, namely: skills training/capacity-building, micro-finance programs and community-based initiatives. As a Syrian refugee woman from Tripoli shared:

> "[...] the skills they teach us are important. Sure, they are. But in many cases, they are not sensitive to our interests and needs, and they make assumptions about us as women. While teaching a group of women how to sew may be of interest to a good chunk of women from our community, *all* women are not the same. Even when we are given micro-finance, we are dictated exactly which sectors we can put that support into. For me, as a woman whose husband is deceased, I need to learn something more practical, something that helps me generate a faster income. I am not in a two-income household. I cannot learn skills that do not translate into an income anymore." (Female, age: 42, no fixed income, widowed, three kids – entered Lebanon in 2012)

In sum, without accounting for the diverse layers of identity, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, interventions risk overlooking critical needs and perpetuating inequalities within these communities. In response to critiques of UN-centered models of partnering, strong calls emerged for more intersectional refugee-led forms of aid and development approaches. Despite the genuine empowerment that such initiatives can foster, they too encounter challenges with regards to the depth of partnerships and the meaningfulness of tangible solidarity.

The limitations of refugee-led organizations

In the landscape of humanitarian aid and support for refugees, there has been a growing emphasis on empowering refugee-led organizations themselves to cater to the needs of displaced communities. Refugee-led organizations are undoubtedly vital as they offer a bottom-up approach, amplifying the voices and agency of displaced individuals (Arnold-Fernández, 2023). They bring an intimate understanding of the challenges faced by their communities, foster trust, and facilitate culturally sensitive interventions. While the rise of these grassroots initiatives signifies a critical shift towards more inclusive approaches, the reality remains complex and nuanced.

Refugee-led forms of organizing are also subject to underlying power dynamics and competition over resources, both between refugee-led organizations and vis-à-vis more established international humanitarian actors. Resource monopolization means that refugee-led initiatives continue to struggle for funding, access to aid, and recognition. In addition, within refugee communities, these organizations risk reproducing social hierarchies and exclusionary practices. Hierarchies and power dynamics within refugee groups can inadvertently isolate vulnerable refugee sub-groups and their voices from the conversation, fostering internal divisions and overlooking the needs of specific marginalized segments.

Displaced communities encompass diverse groups with varying needs based on factors such as gender, age, disability, and cultural background. This raises the question of who comes to work within these refugee-led organizations and initiatives, who comes to define what the collective needs are, and who gets the right to speak on behalf of the whole. For example, one can be Syrian in Lebanon and work for a refugee-led organization and yet limit the condition of *refugeeness* entirely to those compatriots who – for lack of social capital – are forced to live in informal tented settlements (Alpes et al., 2023).

While refugee-led organizations have a deep understanding of the complexities of their respective communities, varied cultural, linguistic, and ideological backgrounds can also pose challenges in achieving consensus on critical issues. The voices and roles of refugee women and refugees who identify as sexual or gender minorities, for example, often continue to be silenced, and their intersectional needs are often overshadowed by louder and more dominant voices within the community. As refugee-led organizations navigate internal positionalities, the challenge lies not just in acknowledging these differences, but in also mitigating them.

The challenges refugee-led organizations confront when trying to act in solidarity are also deeply rooted in broader systemic issues that go beyond the context and control of refugee-led organizations themselves. For example, refugee-led organizations continue to face strong hierarchies and unequal power relations with international civil society actors that have longer institutional histories. Larger international organizations often wield substantial financial resources (Diab et al., 2024). This power asymmetry can marginalize smaller grassroots groups, limiting their ability to access funding, resources, and decision-making platforms. As funders design humanitarian objectives, refugee-led organizations continue to be forced to dance to the tune of a dominant voice that also dictates a certain vision of what is 'now' and what is in the future. As a Palestinian participant from Syria currently residing in Nabatieh shared:

> "[...] we appreciate the thought process and rationale of the UN around durable solutions and our futures. We really do. However, we know much better than them about what our immediate needs are. We want our kids in school, a roof over our heads, meals at our table and some money in our pocket for health emergencies. Everything else is secondary. And until funding from UNRWA permits them to provide us *all* [Palestinians] with that, we can put other vocational programming, language skills and other things on hold. Sometimes, we find that cash support is cut, but computer classes are resumed. How is this realistic?" (Male, age: 51, construction worker/daily worker, no fixed income, married, 7 children – entered Lebanon 2014).

The hierarchies entrenched within refugee communities significantly influence perceptions of time, urgency, durable solutions and long-term planning. Sub-groups within communities, shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities, often prioritize distinct agendas based on their immediate necessities, as well as their diverging priorities for the short, medium, and long term. For some, the urgency lies in securing basic essentials such as shelter, food, and healthcare, demanding immediate attention to alleviate pressing hardships. Conversely, others seek avenues for education, stable employment, and legal status. This multifaceted temporal understanding within refugee communities underscores the complexity of requiring refugee-led organizations to navigate and reconcile varying perspectives. This is where we believe research comes in to facilitate refugees' own understanding of their conceptions and practices of time.

Partnering with and for refugees in research
In research, critiques of extractivism have opened the door to new methodological innovations that seek to create positive impact for research participants in more direct ways. We discuss two methodological approaches from prospection and social work that have allowed us to partner in new creative ways with and for refugees in our research.

Futures Literacy Labs (FLLs)
Prospection practices predominantly cater to the needs of states to control and plan for the future. This is why a sub-strand in futures studies has, since the late 2000s, developed participatory and inclusive methods for population groups that feel they do not own a future (Miller, 2018; Feukeu et al., 2021). The objective of these methods is to build the capacity of participants to go beyond foreclosed decision making based on limiting assumptions about the future. "Futures Literacy Labs" achieve this objective by mobilizing creative exercises that alternate between individual reflections, paired and group work, as well as plenary reporting.

Futures Literacy Labs can last from three hours to three days and take participants through an experiential learning curve of three phases. Phase one asks participants – through exercises and sharing – to express what they believe to know about the future in order to reveal the assumptions on which participants base their images of the future. Phase two creates – with the help of creative reframing techniques – conditions for participants to overcome limiting anticipatory assumptions and to expand the boundaries of what participants imagine to be possible. In phase three, participants explore new insights, surprises, transformations and lessons learned from these different futures.

Futures Literacy Labs are designed to be accessible for and appropriated by all participants. This is why they are always co-designed and co-facilitated with members of the respective community that participates in the lab. This is important so that activities respond to the characteristics, needs and desires of their participants. Moreover, the co-designers of a lab decide together whom they consider to be part of the "community." And, anyone who has participated in a futures literacy lab is trained in the basic principles of a lab and can decide to co-design and co-facilitate further ones. One of the co-designers of a series of labs

with Syrian families in Lebanon, for example, was a prior participant of a Futures Literacy Lab that had been organized by a refugee-led organization. His motivation to co-design and co-facilitate further labs was intimately tied to how the lab had transformed his conceptions of himself and his relationship to time and space:

> "During my early years in Lebanon, […] I was content with the simple knowledge of how to survive: providing UNHCR with a heartbreaking story for them to take me to the place where I really wanted to be. After doing my first futures literacy lab, I came to a new definition of what it means to be a refugee – even in Lebanon. I need to continue my studies so that I can change my status. I'm now applying for jobs in Lebanon where I show who I am and what I can do for this place. Having studied and worked, I can plan to leave Lebanon without needing to feel like a victim."

The design of a lab can take many months and includes prolonged discussions about internal power dynamics within a chosen community of lab participants, including how to best address them. In a series of three labs with three respective Syrian families in Lebanon in 2021, for example, the co-designed lab catered to the prayer times of the heads of family, carefully calculating the exact time it would take to walk from the family home to the mosque and back for each respective prayer time. As co-designers and co-facilitators, we were honored when the head of one family during the three-day lab spontaneously and on his own accord suggested doing his prayers from home. His proposal allowed us to catch up on our delay in the lab schedule, and eased the logistics for the family meals that also needed cooking (Alpes et al., 2023). His proposal suggests that he had felt respected in our lab design and committed to making the learning journey of the lab a success for everyone.

Honoring family codes was important in all our Futures Literacy Labs with Syrian families in order to create a setting where everyone was able, but nobody was obliged to speak. As one of the children who participated in a lab shared afterwards:

> "It was the first time in our family to think of us as individual people and for us to accept that we all have different goals. [...] We miss talking in the family because we respect the father and the mother and they are the ones who have the power to control the conversation. When they say stop, you stop. If there is a Futures Literacy Lab, then everyone in the family has a moment to talk."

After the labs, we made a choice to also co-analyze what had happened during the lab. This allowed us to learn about changes in power relations between family members even after the lab. The head of one family, for example, chose to call one of his sons to lift a family secret he had been keeping for over ten years. Still living in Syria with his two sons abroad, he finally explained why he had lost his job and not traveled within Syria since. He was wanted by the regime. The lab had paved the way for him to connect in new ways to his two sons in Lebanon and in the US. Furthermore, as researchers, we learned about something which he almost certainly would not have revealed in an interview. Researchers typically assume they can access refugee voices through interviews or surveys. We forget that a simple space to talk or write for refugees socialized to be in "emergency" and "survival" mode is not enough.

A key benefit of working with Futures Literacy Labs is the ability to work with individuals and communities in ways that directly intervene and address perceptions of time. The creative methods and careful co-design of FLLs allow research participants to exit survival mode and thus to change how they look at themselves and their relationships to others. Creating this space-moment, as well as the capacity to recognize and transform conceptions and practices of time is in and of itself meaningful for lab participants. Throughout the three phases of a lab, participants learn to enact and embody futures that go beyond their anticipatory assumptions. As a result, lab participants go out of the lab with a

greater awareness of their assumptions about the future, a set of new embodied experiences of alternative practices of time, as well as the capacity to use both for their own choices in the present.

Futures Literacy Labs typically result in new ideas for practices in the present that can have an impact on the future (Alpes et al., 2023). Whether or not these future images are close or far does not matter as we can only ever act in the present. The participants' sense of urgency and absolute priority for the immediate can evolve, but this is in no way the pre-formulated objective of a lab. Whether and the extent to which this is desirable is in the hands of the labs' participants. By participating in a lab, they develop the capacity to make such choices for themselves.

Trauma-informed Participatory Approaches (TiPAs)

Employing TiPAs in engaging with refugee communities constitutes a fundamental pillar in developing responses and support systems that authentically meet their intersectional immediate needs and true priorities (Darouiche, 2023). By adopting these approaches, researchers and aid organizations gain invaluable insights into the complex, multifaceted experiences of refugees.

Our first encounters with TiPAs followed recurrent experiences collecting qualitative data with displaced communities in the same locations across Lebanon, whereby participants would reiterate the same challenges, hurdles, and inadequacies of the humanitarian system over extended periods of time. In the data collection approach within these spaces, there was a disconnect in exactly how data was being collected, how methodologies and tools for this data collection were developed and designed, as well as who took part in these conversations, how they took part, and why. The adoption of TiPAs stemmed from a will to not only collect testimony effectively, but also to move the conversation with refugees from one of feedback on existing (seemingly rigid) lines of programming and response, to one of participation, agency and respect. For this reason, purposive sampling was adopted. This is a non-probability sampling technique where researchers deliberately choose participants based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Unlike random sampling methods, purposive sampling allows researchers to target individuals or groups who possess the desired qualities or experiences that are essential for addressing the research questions effectively. Through this form of sampling, we were able to ensure that sub-categories across age, ability, gender, etc. were part of the design and research process.

As such, TiPAs prioritize the empowerment and agency of participants while recognizing and addressing the potential effects of trauma throughout the research process (Isobel, 2021; Alessi & Kahn, 2022; Edelman, 2023; Karmakar & Duggal, 2023). Participants are actively involved in shaping the research questions, methodologies, and interpretation of findings, ensuring their voices are not only heard but also valued. Through collaborative dialogue and respect for individual experiences, the approach aims to minimize re-traumatization through centering on principles such as safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural humility, as well as the creation of an inclusive and supportive environment where participants do not feel like the subjects of the study, but rather agents in the study process (Diab & Al-Azzeh, 2024; Azzeh, 2023; Darouiche, 2023).

Moreover, this involves fostering trust, valuing participants' knowledge, and ensuring confidentiality and informed consent throughout the research journey. Additionally, under this approach, researchers undergo training in trauma-informed practices to comprehend and navigate the potential impact of trauma on refugees' lived experiences. Most importantly, this enables a care-focused approach to discussions, aiming to avoid re-traumatization. Creating safe and supportive spaces for interviews or group discussions is crucial under this approach, entailing careful location selection, ensuring privacy, and fostering a non-threatening atmosphere. Moreover, trauma-informed interview techniques such as being mindful of language, tone, and pacing, allows participants to share comfortably,

and move beyond a rigid set of questions. These techniques include approaches such as "free recall," using context and sensory-based questions, and reframing (Azzeh, 2023).

Throughout our interviews, inception phases and design, conceptions around time emerged very early on in our conversations. Just like in the FLLs, voices emerged to highlight that temporal understandings are felt, realized and endured very differently within the refugee community itself. In an inception convening organized by the Institute for Migration Studies at the Lebanese American University, that brought together queer Syrian refugees to explore prioritization and perceived hierarchies of vulnerabilities within the community for a qualitative study, one respondent shares:

> "[...] they tell us that 'as early as next project cycle,' which is effectively in two years, that gender programming will be more inclusive, will be less binary, and will account for intersectional experiences, needs and vulnerabilities. How dare they use words like 'early' or 'soon' or even 'next' to play down what a moment in time feels like for us. There is detachment in understandings around urgency. They might not feel it from one project cycle to the next after they 'collect our feedback,' but as a queer Syrian transwoman in Lebanon, every minute is a lifetime." (Non-binary, age: 29, performer/no fixed income, single, no children – entered Lebanon in 2013).

In sum, trauma-informed participatory approaches foster a sense of empowerment and trust within refugee communities. By centering these methodologies, it communicates a fundamental respect for the experiences of individuals who have undergone displacement and trauma –particularly, respect to those who form part of intersectionally vulnerable groups such as sexual and gender minorities. This participatory and inclusive approach enables refugees to reclaim agency over their lives, ensuring that responses align with their cultural, social, and psychological needs, thereby fostering more sustainable and meaningful support systems.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, disparities persist between UN agencies and refugees, hindering effective participatory approaches despite clear communication of urgent needs. Rather than just critiquing policies and practices in the humanitarian sector, researchers can contribute intersectional insights to the design and implementation of partnering models. A desire for constructive critique and caring research is why both authors have blurred boundaries between research and solidarity in our experimentations with Futures Literacy Labs and trauma-informed participatory methods.

Our respective research experimentations reveal avenues for intersectional resistance. The meaning and practice of solidarity in both research experimentations is based on recognizing the agency and dignity of refugees by making space for feelings, 'dislocated emotions' and 'displaced selves', and how these discoveries translate into action (Christou, 2011; Ozkaleli, 2018). Solidarity is manifested through mutually shared time together, where researchers and refugees meet to learn together with the help of inclusive and empowering methods. This was possible because research participants had the possibility to make decisions about the research design, methods and outcomes. The Futures Literacy Labs and the trauma-informed participatory approach shifted power dynamics from being researched upon to becoming researchers and even co-authors. In addition, the Futures Literacy Labs allowed participants to research new actions in the present, making them able to facilitate more desirable futures. The trauma-informed participatory experimentations allowed research participants to co-create institutional interventions based on collective research findings.

Drawing on our experiences, we believe that trauma-informed participatory approaches and Futures Literacy Labs can serve to inform participatory frameworks within humanitarian work, too. The practicality of this approach lies in its adaptability and

responsiveness to diverse community contexts. Engaging refugees as active participants enables the co-creation of culturally sensitive interventions. Both methodologies amplify marginalized voices, and hold the potential to foster more meaningful, timely and impactful partnerships and responses.

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