

## **Information Behaviors of Persons in Refugee Camps: A Review**

### **Abstract**

Information behavior studies within refugee camps is very limited. This review of the literature on information behavior in camps has a threefold purpose: to identify the information needs and behaviors of residents and aid workers, to assess the flow of information throughout the camps, and to determine barriers to information access. Information most frequently sought includes food, shelter, resettlement, health, and news on specific conflicts. Barriers to information access include lack of security, poor information flow into camps, and poor information flow within camps. GIS maps created by camp residents are particularly promising at ameliorating these issues, as they can include formal and informal information locations, are able to be used by NGOs and residents alike, and the process can teach marketable skills to participants. However, further study is needed in many areas of information behavior in refugee camps, including information flow, information grounds, health information, and gendered information behaviors.

*Keywords:* Displaced Person, Refugee, Camp, Information Behavior, Information Poverty, Knowledge Distribution, Urban Planning

---

### **1. Introduction**

One person is forcibly displaced from their home every 2 seconds, due to violence or political instability, joining the ranks of 68 million who are already displaced (UNHCR, 2018). Many of these displaced persons live in camps where they face food insecurity, limited basic services, and violence (Obodoruku, 2014). Their everyday information needs to gain food, security, and resettlement are both pressing and vital. Managing this information in order to best assist the affected persons is extremely important, and yet the literature available is limited. This paper is a

review of literature on the information behaviors of those in refugee camps, with suggestions for further research, and a discussion of important findings.

## **2. Literature Review**

The information needs of displaced persons has previously been categorized as basic needs, such as maps, survival needs, such as food and shelter, research needs, such as employment and asylum, and human needs, such as counselling (Kanyengo and Kanyengo, 2011). However, the information needs and behaviors of those within settlement camps are very specific.

The information needs of internally displaced persons in camps at Borno state, Nigeria, was recently studied by Sambo (2017). The author used structured interviews and questionnaires for 321 people over 18 years old, with 64% of the respondents identifying as female, which is consistent with the demographics of the camp. The information sought primarily concerns relocation, conflict news, health, finances, and vocational training. Aspects of daily life which negatively affect information behaviors are monetary issues, health issues, inadequate shelter, and food insecurity, as well as fears of violence and institutional corruption. Sambo ultimately calls for the information from formal sources to be consistently accurate, in order to minimize the negative effect on camp residents. The author does not mention that such accuracy can also build trust in formal sources, which can be seen both as an added benefit and institutional incentive to maintain quality.

Olasunkanmi and Oyeleke reported on environmental factors affecting the information behavior of persons in refugee camps (2016). They surveyed roughly 230 refugees in Nigeria using a descriptive survey research method. Participants were questioned about how certain aspects, such as health issues or violence, factored into their information behaviors. The most needed information concerned food and health, housing, employment, and education. Respondents sought information

primarily from the internet, camp media or leaders, and friends. Political factors were reported to negatively affect information behaviors, though the factors themselves and how they affect behavior was not discussed. Like Sambo, the authors highlighted the importance of trustworthy information, particularly for formal sources, as trustworthiness is ultimately reflected in usage.

Obodoruku studied information needs among refugees in the Nyarugusu camp in Tanzania, and assessed the role of information in the camp, source usage by demographics, and social characteristics of information (2014). The author used structured, individual interviews for 34 refugees, and separately questioned 36 individuals in focus groups. Information sought was primarily centered on resettlement/repatriation, family members, and camp life. Respondents stated that information on food distribution and rations was not widely dispersed, and that the information available to them did not satisfy what was needed or sought. People often received information at frequently visited areas of the camp: the hospital, school, church, and market. Male respondents sought information from formal sources first, and then informal, while women sought information from informal sources first, then from trusted men, and finally from formal sources. Many in the study stated that they do not seek information for fear of violence or a fear of the information itself. Those from rural backgrounds cited a higher need for information than those from villages or cities, which suggests that navigating city life requires its own specific information. Details on this information, however, were unfortunately not included.

Information and communication practices related to media in three Thai-Burma border camps was recently assessed by Jack (2017). The author studied 81 refugees, aid workers, and journalists using semi-structured interviews and over 100 hours of participant observation. Jack claims that camp-based media does not satisfy the information needs of the community it serves, particularly because it does not on the daily experiences of those living within the camp. Problems

related to inadequate information dispersal were highlighted when a fire broke out in the camp, and residents could not find credible information about the disaster. Similarly, providing information about the camp to outsiders is challenging because few journalists cover the camp, and many fear obstruction by camp authorities. Ultimately, the author calls for internal media to provide useful information to camp residents, to act as a watchdog over the operations of the camp, and to highlight international human rights laws. Given the concerns with obstruction by authorities, however, focusing efforts on information dissemination rather than investigative efforts may be a more practical avenue to pursue.

In regards to the news media, Wall, Campbell, and Janbeck recently assessed the information precarity of Syrian Refugees (2017). Information precarity is the instability of technological and social access to information, the proliferation of irrelevant-to-dangerous misinformation, and the lack of personal image control. Wall et al. conducted 10 focus groups, which included 4-12 participants each, with five groups being entirely composed of women. Important information sought included social networks, camp programs, aid, and news of the Syrian conflict. Respondents regarded their cell phones as vital as food, for they have become crucial as both information resources and political tools. However, cell phone usage was vulnerable and fragile, for refugees face difficulties navigating phone network systems in new countries, finding cellular reception, and paying phone bills. Respondents also discussed problems with their personal information being distorted by media, and their struggle to use social media to reassert control. Suspicions about information, both formal and informal, were high, particularly because the Syrian government promoted propaganda and misinformation. While the findings of this study are striking, their specific context must be taken into account, as mobile device access and media coverage differs between countries and among camps.

Fisher and Yafi, for instance, found prevalent mobile access in their analysis of the information behaviors of syrian youth in the Za'atari Refugee Camp (2018). The authors provided surveys to youth in education programs as well as through street distribution. Participants were asked about internet and mobile phone habits, personal interests, and their role in the community. The authors were particularly focused on how the youths acted as information, communication, and technology wayfarers for others in the camp. The respondents, aged 20.6 on average, and of even gender balance, reported high mobile phone and SIM card ownership, around 80% for each. They reported offering and receiving ICT help, primarily about online education, searching, news, and employment. Interestingly, aid organizations are beginning to communicate information to camp settlers through mobile devices, which shows both the ubiquity and the importance of mobile phones in refugee camps.

In regards to the dispersal of health information in camps, Morrison assessed the contraceptive information needs of Cambodian Refugees in Khao Phlu Camp (2000). 102 women were surveyed and interviewed about their knowledge of contraception. 24% responded that they did not practice contraception because they lacked information about it, and roughly 40% did not know that the camp offered contraception methods. 28 men in a focus group were also surveyed, and were also largely unaware of contraceptive methods available in the camp. The male respondents also largely believed misinformation about contraception side effects, though they were in favor of family planning. Few knew of emergency contraception options, though, given the prevalence of sexual violence, the need for emergency contraception awareness is vital. Following the study, requests for contraception rose 168%, which the authors attribute to information being spread through word-of-mouth, for a nearby camp did not report any increase in contraceptive demand. The authors encourage expanding access to family planning through information and

education. They also encourage traditional birth attendants to spread information. The desire for family planning, and resulting rise in demand highlights the need for contraception, yet the fact that 40% of respondents were unaware of the services in the camp highlights major problems with this information dispersal.

Kanyengo and Kanyengo assessed formal information sites in refugee communities in Zambia, and how libraries can assist with information dispersal efforts (2011). Theirs is a case study composed of documented reports, books, and articles, and is supplemented by the reflections of one of the authors, who ran sexual and gender based programs in various camps. They report that information dispersal is decentralized, and comes from a variety of sources and organizations who are working on different aspects of camp life. Agricultural information is usually exchanged through workshops, meetings, and field visits, while sexual and gender based violence information is disseminated through visual media, churches, and schools. Information is also disseminated through theater, dance, video, or sport, and attendance for these methods often outnumber those for traditional classroom-style meetings. One unique method of disseminating information is to print messages on wraps that women wear around their waists; a method which has been used to spread information about measles, malaria, and HIV/AIDS. Ultimately, the authors stress the importance of libraries for refugee communities to identify and fill the persistent information needs of existing information centers, in order to be of most benefit and to create trust in the library. This method, of utilizing information channels that already exist, and attempting to provide them with relevant information, appears to be both practical and replicable.

Tomaszewski, Al-Najdawi, Martin, Tedmori, Omondi, and Hamad implemented a refugee-operated Geographic Information Systems project in the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan to document community information (2017). 6 participants were selected based on their spatial

reasoning aptitude, as determined by STAT test results, and their motivation for the project. The applicants ages ranged from 18-54 and had varying levels of educational backgrounds. The participants conducted field surveys of residents, which placed those living in the camps at the center of its information management. The participants identified community assets to be mapped, such as individuals with specific language skills, musicians in the community, and bicycle repair locations. That camp residents were taught marketable skills and produced informational maps to be used both by camp residents and aid organizations alike is a testament to the beneficial nature of this program.

Information flow within refugee camps is also affected by physical layout, which Stevenson addresses in a study of urban planning in refugee camps (2011). While not specifically discussing information behavior, this work addresses many of the issues related to it, such as distance to information sites creating barriers to access. Problems arise, Stevenson argues, because though camps are proposed as temporary, they often last for years, even decades. As such, information centers, like schools, markets, health services, and communal facilities are purposely central in order to accommodate aid organizations, and not spatially dispersed to accommodate residents. Thus informal services and facilities arise in the outskirts of the camps, yet these informal spaces located in isolated areas often have safety concerns. The author acknowledges that the constraints of service organizations such as resource scarcity can influence their ability to provide quality information. However, this study, in addressing the many issues of information behavior and flow in camps, also offers a focused solution not highlighted in other literature, which is to address information challenges by focusing on decentralized infrastructure.

### **3. Gaps in the Literature**

The literature on this area is extremely, and understandably, limited. Access, funding, security, and sensitivity are all issues that must be broached to study within a refugee camp. There is little reporting on which groups are finding their information needs disproportionately unmet, and as such, few suggestions on how to ameliorate the situation. However, there are indications of unusual activity which warrant further study. The fact that those from rural backgrounds demonstrate more information needs than those from village backgrounds is an important finding that should be studied further. This finding signals that some displaced persons need information about adjusting to city life in general, in addition to the information needed to adjust to life in a particular refugee camp. Kanyengo and Kanyengo also note that there is a wide variety of literacy levels within refugee communities (2011), which is another topic that should be explored further, in order to best to help the wide variety of refugees in these communities.

One issue that is rarely assessed is information flow to aid groups within refugee communities. If the study of information behavior follows the red thread of information through human activity (Bates, 1989), then assessing the origins of the thread into the camps is vital to understanding how well it flow throughout the camp, and to those who have need of it. For example, in 2006, the International Council of Nurses sent books containing the latest health information to nurses in camps in Tanzania and Zambia (ICN/MSD, 2006), as the nurses at the camps previously had zero reference materials. This delivery was paired with training exercises and location-specific materials, focusing on issues such as malaria. Without such resources, they had limited means to provide the vital health information that so many of those residing in the camps seek. Thus the flow of information into refugee camps is an important facet of information behavior there that must be studied further.



A third aspect of the information behaviors of those in refugee camps that must be studied further are physical representations of information flow throughout the camps. How people use their physical spaces directly connects to how information flows through these spaces, and yet there is very little literature assessing such information flow. This is particularly important as many studies cited a lack of physical safety and distance from information centers as barriers to information access for camp residents. Thus, further study that assesses the physical layout of the camp in conjunction with representations of information flow are critical to addressing problems with information access and satisfying critical information needs.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The literature on the information behaviors of those in refugee camps offers many important findings. The first deals with their everyday life information behaviors, wherein the conditions of camp life determine both their way of life and their mastery of it (Savolainen, 1995). Given the poor conditions of many camps, daily information behaviors often prioritize basic needs such as food and shelter, as well as resettlement or repatriation information, and information on specific conflicts. However, this information is difficult to come by, and as such there are high levels of fear and secrecy around information, which is a marker of Information Poverty (Chatman, 1996).

The second important finding is that information does not flow optimally within refugee camps, resulting in poor opportunities to encounter information for those residing in them. Barriers to information access are cited frequently in the literature, such as distance to information centers or a lack of security in accessing information. Occurrences of informal information grounds (Pettigrew, 1998) are frequent, and, coupled with barriers to formal access, appear to be important facets of the everyday information behavior of refugees living in camps. However, problems with

information flow into the camp is also apparent. Aid workers facing resource scarcity, uncertain wireless internet connection, and ineffective camp layouts all affect the ability of information to flow into and throughout the camps.

The third important finding is that the literature on information behavior in refugee camps is extremely limited. These spaces, which are supposed to be temporary, can dwarf nearby towns, house as many as 80,000 people, and can last for 20 years or more. Yet while the academic study of how information is used by people in these camps is understandably difficult to carry out, it could be one of the best ways to assist the thousands of people living within them, and to improve the lives of those already fleeing traumatic situations.

### **Acknowledgements**

Funding details: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest.

## References

- Bates, MJ (1989) The design of browsing and berrypicking techniques for the online search interface. *Online Review*, 13(5): 407–424.
- Chatman, EA (1996) The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science (1986-1998); New York*, 47(3): 193–206.
- Fisher, KE, & Yafi, E (2018) Syrian Youth in Za’atari Refugee Camp as ICT Wayfarers: An Exploratory Study Using LEGO and Storytelling (pp. 1–12). ACM Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3209811.3209873>
- ICN/MSD libraries reach refugee camps in Tanzania and Zambia. (2006). *International Nursing Review*, 53(3): 164–165. [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1466-7657.2006.00524\\_2.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1466-7657.2006.00524_2.x)
- Jack, V (2016) “There’s no media for refugees”: Information and communication in camps on the Thai-Burma border. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 22(2): 127.
- Kanyengo, BK, & Kanyengo, CW (2011) Information Provision in Emergency Settings: The Experience of Refugee Communities in Zambia. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian*, 30(4): 246–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639269.2011.622256>
- Morrison, V (2000) Contraceptive Need among Cambodian Refugees in Khao Phlu Camp. *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 26(4): 188–192.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2648257>
- Obodoruku, B (2014) *Human Information Behavior Among African Refugees in Tanzania: An Exploratory Study of the Nyarugusu Camp*. PhD dissertation, Long Island University, C. W. Post Center, New York, United States.
- Olasunkanmi, O, & Oyeleke, O (2016) Environmental Factors on the Information Behavior of Refugees in Nigeria. *Journal of Research and Development*, 187(3418): 1–13.

- Pettigrew, KE (1998) *The role of community health nurses in providing information and referral to the elderly: A study based on social network theory*. PhD dissertation, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.
- Sambo, AS (2017) Internal Displaced Persons and Their Information Needs. *Library Philosophy & Practice*, 1512: 1–15.
- Savolainen, R (1995) Everyday life information seeking: Approaching information seeking in the context of “way of life.” *Library & Information Science Research*, 17(3): 259–294.
- Stevenson, A, & Sutton, R (2011) There’s No Place Like a Refugee Camp? Urban Planning and Participation in the Camp Context. *Refuge (0229-5113)*, 28(1): 137–148.
- Tomaszewski, B, Al-Najdawi, N, Martin, J, Tedmori, S, Omondi, I, & Hamad, Y (2017) Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in Za’atari refugee camp, Jordan for refugee community information management and mobilization: The RefuGIS project. In *2017 IEEE Global Humanitarian Technology Conference (GHTC)* (pp. 1–10).  
<https://doi.org/10.1109/GHTC.2017.8239276>
- UNHCR (2018) *Figures at a Glance*. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>
- Wall, M, Otis Campbell, M, & Janbek, D (2017) Syrian refugees and information precarity. *New Media & Society*, 19(2): 240–254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815591967>