

Beyond survival in displacement

Rights essential for wellbeing

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Key messages

Wellbeing is not just a luxury to be enjoyed in times of peace or prosperity, but also **a fundamental right during crisis**. But, within a humanitarian system that prioritises the provision of what is deemed lifesaving assistance and the meeting of basic needs, interventions too often overlook large parts of what affected people really want, in order to live meaningful lives.

Efforts to improve wellbeing of people in crisis are often constrained by political factors, including **restrictions on the rights to work, education and movement**. A rights-focused agenda must be reinvigorated if interventions to help people in crisis are to be meaningful for those on the receiving end of them.

Improving wellbeing is not about increasing resources, but about how humanitarian responses operate. Important steps, such as **devolving decision-making to displaced populations**, can have a major positive impact on wellbeing and should be a core element of any humanitarian response.

The current humanitarian funding situation undermines efforts to ensure wellbeing for people in crisis. There must be **an urgent expansion of multi-year and flexible financing** so interventions can be planned with longer term coherence, offering some stability to people experiencing conflict and crisis.

Failing to recognise wellbeing in programme design has **real consequences for humanitarian actors**. It can make programming ineffective or wasteful, allow opportunities to be missed, and even cause significant and lasting - if unintended - harm to affected people.

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Overview

‘People strive not just to exist, but to live, in ways that they believe have meaning and value’ (Lough et al., 2023: 6), and this is no less true in times of crisis. Wellbeing is not just a luxury to be enjoyed in times of peace or prosperity, but also a fundamental right during crisis. Being able to address material needs is important, but to live ‘good’, ‘meaningful’ or ‘flourishing’ lives goes beyond pure survival. A sense of wellbeing includes subjective perceptions about what is important as well as geographical, social and moral elements, for example through a sense of place, the feeling of being part of a community or the aspirations one holds (ibid.; Siddiqui et al., 2024).

This understanding of wellbeing tends to be at odds with humanitarian systems that prioritise the provision of what is deemed lifesaving assistance and the meeting of basic needs (Feldman, 2017). This utilitarian, typically top-down approach often deems broader issues of wellbeing ‘beyond the capacity of humanitarian resources and systems’ (Coghlan, 2019: 4). Consequently, humanitarian assistance often overlooks large parts of people’s existence, such as culture, education, work, sport, religion, sex, relationships or even having a basic sense of agency and control – leading crisis-affected people to repeatedly stress that aid fails to consider their most pressing needs and priorities (Anderson et al., 2012; GTS, 2022; Lough et al., 2023).

There have been sectoral improvements over the years, with growing acknowledgement of the importance of cross-cutting mental health and psychosocial support interventions and increased focus on accountability to affected populations (AAP). Such initiatives, however, are irregular across responses, often not informed by the preferences of affected populations and typically have to compete against other humanitarian priorities. Efforts to enhance wellbeing can also be constrained by political factors, from inconsistent humanitarian financing to state restrictions on movement and work rights. A particularly poignant example is displaced populations being stuck in low-quality shelters because local authorities want to emphasise the impermanence of displacement. Yet displacement is usually long-term; as politics and principles collide, wellbeing suffers.

Whilst the foundation of the humanitarian system is purportedly ‘lifesaving’ or emergency assistance, it is more often engaged in work that could be described as basic ‘care and maintenance’ (Sida et al., 2024). Annualised ‘lifesaving’ funding and programming leads to ‘conditions of chronic uncertainty, material constraint and daily stress that so often characterise protracted crises and can have a profound impact on people’s ability to imagine possible futures’ (Lough et al., 2023: 33).

This policy brief is the culmination of a two-year research agenda, *Beyond survival: wellbeing in protracted crises*. It synthesises an extensive literature analysis (see Lough et al., 2023) and two case studies exploring aspirations and wellbeing amongst Karen refugee youth in Thailand (see

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Hill et al., 2023) and in the context of Kurdish state formation in Northeast Syria (NES) (see Siddiqui et al., 2024). Despite contextual specificities, the findings and implications of these studies for humanitarian actors carry broader relevance across response settings.

This brief contends that wellbeing is inextricably linked with the rights of crisis-affected populations. Throughout the research, interviewees highlighted how the rights to freedom of expression, education, work and movement were central to their wellbeing. This is notable at a time when rights are increasingly challenged as the basis of humanitarian response, and dwindling aid budgets are driving calls for prioritisation and a back-to-basics, needs-based response. The foregrounding of rights also extends to affected populations wanting influence over the decisions that impact their lives.

While recognising humanitarian systems are strained, this paper makes the following **recommendations** so that humanitarian actors are more likely to support, rather than impede, the wellbeing of crisis-affected populations:

- Donors and implementing agencies must renew and sustain efforts to address structural impediments to improved wellbeing, such as advocacy and policy initiatives related to improving displaced population's rights to work, education and movement.
- Donors and implementing agencies should integrate a wellbeing approach into their strategies and practice, drawing on lessons and effective practices from AAP initiatives and addressing the importance of collective wellbeing.
- Donors must dramatically expand multi-year and flexible funding, with specific allocations for wellbeing issues, that is directed by affected populations to address their specific wellbeing priorities and preferences.
- International humanitarian actors need to prioritise working with and supporting local civil society actors, particularly organisations led by refugees and affected populations, who are best placed to understand and design initiatives that enhance affected populations' wellbeing.
- Where applicable, international and local humanitarian actors must improve engagement and coordination with de facto state-like actors, to address barriers to wellbeing, increase humanitarian response coherence and enhance conflict sensitivity.

Why is an understanding of people's wellbeing important for humanitarian programming?

Box 1 Beyond survival: what is wellbeing?

In public policy, the concept of wellbeing has been largely understood through three core domains. First, there are the material or objective aspects of life such as food, income and commodities. Second, how these material needs are interpreted is entangled in people's subjective perceptions about what is important. Third, there is a relational element: what people value or consider important is ultimately shaped by their interactions with others. Over time, this relational aspect has attracted increased attention, leading to consideration of two further dimensions: time and place. This broader lens is better equipped to understand the social and cultural construction of wellbeing (see White, 2016; McGregor, 2018).

This framework offers a useful way to structure thinking beyond survival in humanitarian settings for several reasons:

- The emphasis placed on social relations for wellbeing can mitigate the humanitarian attention on individuals or households as the focus of intervention. Instead, it encourages analysis of the community as a whole and how life is experienced and understood collectively (Atkinson et al., 2019).
- This framing highlights the importance of place and a 'sense of place' for wellbeing. This has clear relevance for humanitarian action, particularly when responding in displacement contexts, where the loss of – and attempts to rebuild – a sense of place are typically priorities for affected people.
- Understanding wellbeing over time is important because humanitarian crises are not static; they continually evolve, and what matters to people also changes. This is especially important in protracted crises, where initial humanitarian urgency gives way to longer-term action that has significant ramifications for wellbeing.
- Understanding wellbeing as holistic encourages humanitarians to consider wider factors like culture and religion not as issues that can impact service provision, but rather as critical elements for enhancing wellbeing (Eyber, 2016; Feldman, 2018; Wilkinson, 2020).

The 'beyond survival' framing requires explicit engagement with affected populations' agency and how power relations relate to wellbeing, prompting humanitarian actors to consider how they expand agency and reduce forms of control.

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The sustained involvement of humanitarian actors in the lives of people affected by protracted crises influences both the latter's ability to survive and, ultimately, the kinds of lives they can live. Decisions and assumptions made by humanitarian actors about prioritisation and aid delivery mechanisms as well as their relationship with affected people can have major implications for wellbeing. For example, this can impact not just decisions between food aid or cash, but also when, where and to whom such assistance is provided. Ensuring people have enough calories to survive is important, but so too is making sure those rations provide a sense of dignity and continuity (see Dunn, 2014; Lough et al., 2023). The airdropping of American ready-to-eat meals into Gaza at the beginning of March 2024 is illustrative; they were designed around convenience for delivery rather than being appropriate to the affected population's typical diet. This compounds indignity rather than supports wellbeing.

There are three primary consequences for humanitarian actors and programming if they fail to understand the interrelated dimensions of wellbeing (Lough et al., 2023):

- There's the potential for ineffective or wasteful programming if it doesn't properly grasp and integrate the complex and interconnected priorities of people's lives.
- It risks causing significant and lasting – if unintended – harm, when humanitarian programming actively undermines affected people's efforts to re-establish what they perceive as normal lives, or to create a better future.
- Opportunities are missed where humanitarian actors can more effectively support people's wider wellbeing.

Although humanitarian responses are bound by political dynamics and by fluctuating, typically inadequate financial resources, a focus on wellbeing remains pertinent. It does not inherently require additional resources, but rather requires a conscious and deliberate allocation of existing resources, where affected populations are decision-makers. Concurrently, it means avoiding interventions that may undermine wellbeing and, in this regard, has parallels with do-no-harm and conflict-sensitive programming. For example, insufficient funding often prompts humanitarian actors to target the most vulnerable individuals or households, which might be according to externally imposed criteria and often through opaque targeting processes that run against local perceptions of fairness or social cohesion (Fernandez et al., 2022; Lough et al., 2022). In contrast, a wellbeing approach considers broader relational dynamics and inclusive decision-making for how response resources are allocated.

What matters beyond survival? Lessons from Thailand and Northeast Syria

To explore what matters ‘beyond survival’ in protracted crisis settings, HPG and partners conducted research with long-term displaced communities in Thailand and Northeast Syria (NES). In Thailand, the research team worked with Karen refugees between the ages of 18 and 35 living in two camps along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border to understand barriers and enablers to meaningful lives in protracted displacement. In NES, the research focused on displaced and resident Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian Christian and Yazidi people in Qamishli, in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), a de facto state formed in response to the war in Syria. The following sections detail the key findings from the case studies.

Rights to movement and work are paramount for wellbeing

Freedom of movement and the right to work are inextricably linked to the wellbeing of people affected by protracted crises. Karen youth in Thailand highlighted the inability to legally leave camps and work as one of the biggest impediments to wellbeing. It created a pervasive sense of being stuck with minimal possibility to improve their prospects. The Karen Refugee Committee is advocating with Thai authorities for greater freedom of movement and work rights, but this has been a decades-old issue with marginal progress (Hill et al., 2023). Although the detrimental impacts of restricted movement and work rights for refugees in Thailand are well known to humanitarian actors, efforts to improve rights have not been consistent. This has led to millions of people from Burma/Myanmar being engaged in informal, precarious and often exploitative work in Thailand. Karen youth are particularly at risk, raising questions about what humanitarian actors can achieve beyond sustaining encampment along the border.

The situation in NES, while different, offers significant parallels to Thailand. Displaced populations from across Syria typically have the right to work in NES, but economic stagnation limits work opportunities. Many interviewees expressed a desire to work abroad, particularly in Europe, but also within the region, such as in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Such movement, however, was restricted by border controls and difficulties in obtaining passports from the Government of Syria (GoS),¹ as an interviewee explains:

We are stuck because we cannot get passports. We can't get it from the government because we are afraid of being drafted and I am wanted by the regime because I have the same name as

1 The importance of civil documentation (passports, birth and death certificates, property deeds) and the difficulty obtaining them is an ever-present issue for people in Syria and displaced populations broadly writ. In this paper, it is referenced as one factor impacting the population's right to movement, but it has more wide-ranging impacts that also affect wellbeing, e.g. access to services or aid. See Lund (2020) for more detail.

someone they are looking for. The AANES cannot help. (Arab male resident, in Siddiqui et al. (2024))

Many interviewees do not see a future for themselves in NES (or Syria more broadly) and so limitations on any kind of onward migration and opportunities for the future severely undermine wellbeing. Although such limitations extend beyond the typical remit of humanitarian actors and often represent a constant tension between humanitarian donors and implementers, they must be addressed as part of a wellbeing approach. Efforts to support livelihoods in displacement settings are considered ‘mixed at best’ (Crawford and Holloway, 2024: 15), but this research further highlights its importance. Not only is there a role for humanitarian actors to advocate for changes in restrictive host government policies, but there is also a need to look at the role of livelihoods programming in humanitarian response; for example, looking beyond humanitarian action to explore avenues to stimulate local job creation. This is also intricately connected to education issues.

The importance of, but barriers to, education

Access to education and work opportunities were priorities for displaced populations, with barriers to both severely undermining wellbeing. However, this is often deprioritised by the humanitarian community who often see education (amongst other issues, like civil documentation and house, land and property rights) as lower-priority development issues to be addressed in the ‘solutions phase’ (Sida et al., 2024). Yet, education is seen as having ‘near-immediate benefits in terms of children’s protection, psychological wellbeing and development, and a richer and more meaningful life’ (ibid.: 40).

In this study, education – particularly internationally recognised education – is broadly seen as the key to shaping a better future for children, their families and the community as a whole. It was viewed as a means to impart wellbeing both now and in the future, to live flourishing lives (Hill et al., 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2024). In NES, as is the case in other de facto states, people are forced to choose between the two authorities for public goods and administrative needs (Tindall, 2023). Education is one of those choices. The lack of international recognition for the AANES and its education certificates poses a major challenge, as it limits options, whereas education from GoS-run schools is widely recognised. In practice, this lack of recognition means that students at AANES schools are largely restricted to attending AANES-run universities and to being qualified for jobs within the AANES public and private sectors. Consequently, some Kurdish people living in NES are forced to choose between what they consider the liberating (yet limiting) AANES education, or that of the regime, which is oppressive but comes with the benefit of keeping more opportunities open. These parents often sacrifice one element of their wellbeing – cultural expression – for the future educational and economic prospects that an internationally recognised education offers their children (see Siddiqui et al., 2024 for more detail).

Education was similarly important for Karen refugees in Thailand, where both a lack of accredited education and severely limited opportunities for further study often led to a sense

of hopelessness. For humanitarian actors, education – especially at higher levels and with accreditation – is often considered secondary amidst competing priorities and dwindling funding. Karen refugees were also restricted by the Thai government from attending local schools. Such limitations created a ceiling in educational advancement that was incongruent with youth aspirations, thus severely diminishing wellbeing.

Social and cultural activities are central to wellbeing

Across both case contexts, wellbeing is intrinsically linked to social and cultural activities. For Karen youth, playing sports, partaking in cultural events, exploring the natural world and practising religion were all deemed important. Many of these activities offered an immediate psychosocial benefit; they are fun and a distraction from the everyday monotony and constraints of camp life. Additionally, these social activities, such as the weekly football competition in Mae La camp, enhanced social networks. Saw Gay Ler from Mae La explained how he has ‘gotten to “know more people” [...] it was a way to build community and have fun’ (Hill et al., 2023: 18).

Similarly, interviewees in NES stated they felt the most comfort, possibility and hope under conditions where they could participate in cultural events and community-building. This was equated with agency, self-sufficiency and, ultimately, wellbeing (Siddiqui et al., 2024). Such a view was expressed primarily by Kurdish interviewees, who were now able to freely express their identity: ‘We can express our culture, dress, customs. This is not political. I am very excited to dress up and do things we couldn’t before’ (Kurd male resident). Such activities were prohibited by the Ba’ath regime in Syria, resulting in holidays being ‘celebrated in secret’ (Kurd displaced woman, from Serekaniye). For non-Kurdish interviewees, such freedom was seen as less significant, in part because it had not been restricted in the same way as it had been for Kurdish communities. This also owed to their experience of displacement and worsening economic situation, which meant many non-Kurdish communities could no longer celebrate in a way they found meaningful. This differentiation reinforces that humanitarian actors need to be flexible in supporting wellbeing to meet differing needs of heterogeneous populations.

Participation and agency as entry points

Across both contexts, the findings relate back to participation and agency: many of the factors that negatively impact the lives people can live are beyond their control. Whilst interviewees have learned to navigate the humanitarian response (or lack thereof), the dual governance systems and public services, and the legal restrictions placed on them, life decisions are often ‘motivated by determining and pursuing the least bad outcome’ (Siddiqui et al., 2024: 47). This is in contrast to asking for and attaining the things that make their life more meaningful and fulfilling. For example, on civil documentation, it is often easier to avoid the additional stress and worry associated with travelling into GoS areas to register for new identity documents, which are required to fulfil the desire to migrate for better opportunities. People instead choose to live without documents because the risk is too great (Lund, 2020; Siddiqui et al., 2024).

Relatedly, interviewees in both NES and Thailand valued opportunities to influence humanitarian decision-making, specifically on decisions around aid prioritisation. Exclusion from these discussions, on the other hand, exacerbated the sense of hopelessness and loss of control. People need to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives and be better informed as to why they are not being supported in the ways they believe are necessary. Participants in NES expressed deep hurt at not being considered ‘conflict-affected enough’ to receive regular international humanitarian assistance, despite their traumatic experiences and the ongoing military incursions by Türkiye (Siddiqui et al., 2024).

Humanitarian actors may not be able to immediately address the systemic barriers to wellbeing highlighted by this research, but they are able to substantially improve affected populations’ participation in aid decision-making and implementation. A commitment to wellbeing also entails designing interventions in ways that expand agency. It is important to note that this commitment to a wellbeing approach is a commitment to genuinely enhancing AAP. It goes beyond complaint mechanisms, needs assessments and providing basic information about rights and entitlements; these are all necessary but insufficient elements of the AAP guidance. Humanitarian practitioners need to go beyond the basics to truly engage people in decision-making, while being transparent about decision-making processes.

Conclusion

The overarching conclusion of this study is that wellbeing in protracted crises is intricately connected to the rights of affected populations, alongside their participation and influence in aid prioritisation. In both Thailand and NES, crisis-affected populations highlighted the importance of cultural practices and the benefits of freedom of expression. The centrality of rights was also evident when interviewees consistently identified impeded rights to education, work and movement as antithetical to their pursuit of improved wellbeing. Specifically,

wellbeing is linked not just to people's immediate material needs, subjective experiences, or relations within their communities, but ultimately sits within a wider political landscape of rights upheld, or rights denied (Hill et al., 2023: 45).

For most humanitarian practitioners, such findings are unlikely to be ground-breaking, but they raise critical questions about how humanitarian systems and actors should operate. In a global context where long-term, forced displacement and protracted crises are widespread and resources are stretched, the humanitarian system must adapt in ways that enhance wellbeing. As has been illustrated, the issues are not reducible to only financing but also engage with the nature of the humanitarian system. That it is programmed and structured to respond in a standardised manner at times of crisis lies at the crux of the problem, but these emergency processes are 'inadequate in protracted situations and inadequate to help people towards a solution' (Sida et al., 2024: 38). Instead, renewed attention towards the rights of crisis-affected populations and addressing systemic impediments to wellbeing are required.

The primacy of the humanitarian principles, particularly neutrality, has led to many actors eschewing deeper issues relating to displaced and crisis-affected people's rights. This has contributed to the neglect of important pathways to advancing wellbeing, such as sustained and coherent advocacy and policy initiatives. There are, however, increasing calls for such a rights focus, particularly the synchronisation of calls for justice with humanitarian action, alongside questioning the ethics of humanitarians propping up the encampment of displaced populations (see Kamal, 2023; Barter, 2023). While such critiques may be contentious, a focus on wellbeing offers an important entry point for humanitarians to better address rights issues, enhance affected populations' participation in aid prioritisation, and respect the agency of people living in crisis. As this two-year study has illustrated, it also requires humanitarian actors to engage with the state and related institutions, including those that are not internationally recognised, such as the AANES or the various ethnic administrations across Burma/Myanmar. In a global context where displaced and crisis-affected people are often pawns in political machinations, a focus on wellbeing provides an important counterbalance that humanitarian actors should adopt.

Recommendations

Donors and implementing agencies must renew and sustain efforts to address structural impediments to improved wellbeing.

Many of the structural impediments to improved wellbeing are politicised, particularly rights to work, movement and education, alongside ensuring recognition of education specifically when it is not provided by an internationally recognised state. Despite the difficulties in securing such systemic changes, humanitarian actors must sustain advocacy and policy initiatives to address such barriers to improved wellbeing. The alternative is often inertia, which in turn compounds affected people's sense of hopelessness. This also extends to issues around the politicisation of shelter construction and encampment policies, where humanitarian actors must push for change rather than perpetuate degrading, long-term displacement.

Donors and implementing agencies should integrate a wellbeing approach into their strategies and practice, drawing on lessons and effective practices from AAP initiatives and emphasising the importance of collective wellbeing.

The cross-cutting nature of wellbeing requires a holistic approach, as all aspects of crisis response can have an impact on wellbeing. Such an approach must be centred on enhancing efforts to improve affected people's influence in decision-making over aid prioritisation and implementation, alongside improving accountability to affected populations. This must extend beyond the minimum standard for AAP and truly engage affected populations in the decisions that impact their lives. It is important to also ensure conflict-sensitive communication and prioritisation. Ultimately, a wellbeing approach requires humanitarian actors to understand and address affected people's preferences, aspirations and perceived impediments to wellbeing, looking beyond individuals or households to also address the communal aspects of meaning making.

Donors must dramatically expand multi-year and flexible funding, with specific allocations for bettering the wellbeing of affected populations, that is directed by affected populations to address their specific wellbeing priorities and preferences.

Across the world, crises are increasingly protracted and the need for long-term funding is widely known, yet funding cycles remain short-term and unpredictable. This is antithetical to supporting wellbeing and undermines humanitarian system coherence. This is well known, but the shift to multi-year and flexible funding is still too slow and must accelerate. It is not simply a matter of funding structures, but also mandating that affected populations are genuinely involved in decision-making and able to direct resources towards what they believe is important for wellbeing. Such an approach can also learn from AAP initiatives.

Considering the multidimensional nature of wellbeing, the humanitarian sector must better connect with development and peace initiatives, which tend to better consider wellbeing. This also requires a shift towards greater long-term thinking and planning, where funding approaches must be better synchronised across humanitarian, development and peace spheres.

International humanitarian actors need to prioritise working with and supporting local civil society actors, particularly organisations led by refugees and affected populations.

Efforts to advance localisation and the decolonisation of aid continue to make mixed progress, but a focus on and commitment to improving wellbeing demands reinvigorated efforts. Local and national civil society actors are best placed to work with and understand crisis-affected populations to co-design initiatives that enhance wellbeing. More should also be done by international actors to co-design activities with local humanitarian actors who hold this knowledge and to foster opportunities for joint decision-making. It is critical to shift beyond bare minimum localisation efforts, which stymie systemic change. Local civil society actors are also uniquely positioned to advocate for affected populations, while also offering more accessible employment and other emancipatory opportunities than more distant international humanitarian actors.

Where applicable, international and local humanitarian actors must improve engagement and coordination with de facto state-like actors.

De facto state actors, such as the AANES and ethnic administrations in Burma/Myanmar, are critical stakeholders in the potential to enhance the wellbeing of crisis-affected populations, yet humanitarian actors' engagement with them is often minimal or uncoordinated. This stems in part from donors' reluctance to be seen as recognising and legitimising state-like actors, despite their significant governance role. Humanitarian actors must not simply improve engagement with de facto states, but also advocate to donors for less onerous restrictions on such engagement. Improved coordination with and support for de facto authorities can greatly contribute towards wellbeing, from improving basic service delivery to consolidating stabilisation efforts. It also allows for engagement on the structural impediments to wellbeing, like movement restrictions and the right to work.

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