

SOUTHERN RESPONSES TO DISPLACEMENT – RESEARCH NOTE # 1

Meanings of the South and Refugees' Views and Critiques of Southern Responses to Displacement

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This Research Note explores refugees' and aid providers' **conceptualisations of the South** and refugees' views of **Southern responses to displacement**, drawing on research conducted with over 600 refugees from Syria, members of local host communities and diverse responders to displacement in the contexts of Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye as part of the SOURCED project. Adopting a **multiscalar and multi-perspectival approach** to responses to displacement from Syria, the project has examined **who has been responding, how and why**; and crucially, **how refugees themselves experience, conceptualise, and evaluate these responses**. This Research Note summarises the findings of a Full Research Report titled '*Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye and beyond*'. Read more at www.southernresponses.org.

Meanings of the South: Terminology and Categories

A key focus of the research project has been understanding the roles played by actors from the so-called 'global South' in responding to displacement and conflict. One of the starting points of the SOURCED project is the recognition that **'the South' is conceptualised and understood in a plurality of ways** by different individuals, groups, and organisations. Rather than viewing 'the global South' as a fixed geographical or geopolitical entity, the research found that the label and concept are variously **rejected or accepted** by interlocutors. Some long-term humanitarian practitioners had **never heard of the term 'Southern' or 'Southern responder'** and were only familiar with the existence and roles of Western or Northern donors.

When the terms 'South' or 'Southern' are used, these can refer to different groups of actors and operate across different scales. The project's aim in using the term was not to impose a definition, but to open conversations about the multiplicity of responses from areas often labelled as 'the Global South'. The term **'Southern-led provision' was perceived by some as a pragmatic term** that clarifies the subject without creating crude geographical divisions or forms of 'othering'. Some interlocutors noted that the term 'local' can be politically loaded.

The relationship between **'local' and 'Southern'** was a subject of varied perspectives among people with refugee backgrounds and aid providers.

Some linked 'Southern-ness' to receiving support from **organisations affiliated with countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)**, members of the **'local community'**, or **"from Syrians all over the world"**.

In contrast, other people felt that their small, local initiatives supported by people within the refugee camp were **"Absolutely not" Southern** unless they received funding directly from a "Southern country". This suggested that 'the local' was distinct from 'Southern' in their view.

A striking perspective was offered by a Syrian aid provider in Türkiye who insisted their refugee-led organisation was **"definitely a Northern not a Southern provider"** because of its **"huge budget and enormous programmes"**. This view implied that **wealth and resources were antithetical to the notion of 'Southern-ness'**, aligning 'Northern-ness' with financial capacity.

Conversely, a Lebanese priest felt that the key difference was **funding sustainability**: while Northern providers often have government support, local providers frequently lack it. Due to this absence of sustainable funding, he stated that he identifies as a Southern provider.

Another local provider in Baddawi camp distinguished between ‘local associations’ and ‘Southerners,’ specifically equating **‘the Southerners’ with the Kuwaiti, Saudi, and Qatari Red Crescents**. Many individuals insisted on limiting the definition of Southern countries and organisations to the Gulf only. This frequent equation of the states of the GCC with ‘the South’ or ‘Southern providers’ was notable in the research.

A Jordanian citizen in Amman differentiated between locals and Southern states, stating that **“Locals are much better than other countries within the Southern states,”** suggesting a distinction and even hierarchy within the broader category.

However, a Palestinian refugee highlighted the **blurred nature of these relationships**, noting that it is often unknown whether aid distributed by local individuals is self-financed or relies on contributions from Arab and Muslim-majority countries.

Regarding **Southern States and South-South Cooperation**, the categorisation of countries as ‘South’ or ‘North’ could depend on perceived wealth and capabilities. A Syrian refugee, for instance, considered Türkiye “Northern” because of the **“unprecedented” amount of service and help** it provided, linking capacity to classification. Some practitioners expressed concern that terms like ‘Southern countries’ or ‘South-South cooperation’ could **“undermine the capacities of these countries”** and equate the South with characteristics such as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘incapable’.

However, other perspectives offered more nuanced understandings. While some people preferred terms like ‘developing or developed countries,’ the idea of “this South thing” was acknowledged as sophisticated. ‘The South’ was also recognised as **highly diversified** (“India is not South Africa or Brazil at all... I really think they have nothing to do with each other, but we still call them South”). The idea that **“what is outside of the North, has all become South”** was also articulated.

A significant aspect of the meaning of the South discussed by our interlocutors is the idea of solidarity based on **common historical experiences**. A Jordanian citizen argued that the **motives of Southern actors are “humanitarian”** because they do not intend to colonise or dominate, unlike his perception that other powers have alternative motives for providing assistance. He stated that

“Most if not all Southern countries have lived the same calamities and tragedies. They know what it feels to be colonized, they know what it feels to be displaced, homeless, and a stranger looking for somewhere to belong to. This is why they help, and for me this is what humanitarian means, to feel for others, to have empathy.”

This framing aligns with the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, which consciously use terms like ‘cooperation’ (i.e. South-South cooperation) instead of ‘humanitarian assistance’ or ‘aid donor,’ vocabulary seen as tied to the Northern-led regime. Core principles associated with South-South cooperation include **mutual benefit, solidarity, reciprocity, the absence of political conditionalities, and non-interference in national sovereignty**.

The position of the **UN and/as South** was also explored. Some refugees perceived the UN and its agencies (UNHCR, UNRWA) as the most reputable and well-known service providers, partly because they recognised the **UN ‘as’ a (partly, at least) Southern institution**, including through highlighting the funding it received from countries of the South. This perspective echoes the recognition that the UN and the broader humanitarian ecosystem have **Southern roots and articulations**, with formerly colonised states having played a key role in shaping human rights frameworks.

The Full Report also critiques the common labelling of states from the global South as **‘new’, ‘non-traditional’ and ‘emerging’ responders**. Interviewees highlighted that such terms deny the **long history of support** provided by Southern states. Contra the notion of ‘new’ donors, historically, Southern states were often perceived as having been more active in the past than they are currently. Examples were given of past assistance from Gulf states, Libya, Cuba, and China. These historical models included not just the provision of material aid but also **study grants and work contracts**, offering opportunities beyond immediate relief. Cuba’s long-standing South-South educational migration program, offering professional development opportunities abroad, was particularly valued.

Finally, the report moves **beyond the common equation of South = Gulf**, highlighting that while this conflation is frequent, there is a **wide range of actors from across the global South** involved in responses, including from South America, Africa, and Asia. Countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Brazil, and Cuba emerge in the research as examples of states with distinct approaches and long histories of engagement, although their roles are often less known than those of the Gulf states. Some interviewees explicitly differentiated motivations, seeing Southeast Asian countries as non-political in their aid, compared to the mix of humanitarianism and politics in the case of Gulf countries.

Overall, the research highlights that **meanings of the South are fluid, contested, and multi-layered**. ‘The South’ encompasses geographical regions, economic capacities, historical experiences (especially of colonialism and displacement), political ideologies (like non-alignment and South-South cooperation principles), and is perceived differently depending on the position and experiences of the individual.

Refugees’ Views and Critiques of Southern Responses to Displacement

Refugees’ experiences and perceptions have been central to the SOURCED research project, with the Full Report engaging with refugees’ critical evaluations of the aid landscape. People’s views on Southern responses were diverse, acknowledging contributions while also offering significant critiques.

Initial Responses: Refugees noted that the earliest responses within Syria came from **individuals and community members** within the country itself – including Syrian nationals and long-term refugees (Palestinians, Kurds, Iraqis) – through **mutual aid and individual initiatives**. As the conflict progressed, a wider variety of responders emerged within Syria, including **‘Southern service providers’**.

Diversity and Channels of Southern Aid: After people crossed borders and reached Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye, interviewees noted that Southern states and actors expanded their support. This aid was provided in various ways, including:

- **Direct assistance** to refugees.
- Channelling resources directly to **‘host’ governments**.
- Channelling resources to **NGOs** who would implement programmes on donors’ behalf.
- Supporting **locally-based NGOs and community-based groups**.

The Full Report highlights that **people with refugee backgrounds were often the individuals delivering the aid** funded by Southern donors. Countries like **Malaysia and Indonesia** were recognised as **key supporters of many**

local organisations providing services to refugees. However, **Gulf organisations and states were often seen as the largest contributors**, sometimes perceived as seeking a political role in the region.

Perceptions in Host Countries (Jordan, Türkiye, Lebanon): Views varied across the research locations

In **Jordan**, support from the countries of the GCC was widely known and discussed. Gulf countries were perceived to have provided **“huge support”** that was channelled through the Jordanian government to build refugee camps, provide allowances, and support medical centers, and schools. Some people were aware of cuts in this aid, linked to events such as the Yemeni war.

In **Türkiye**, many interviewees were **unfamiliar with the existence or roles of Southern actors**. The aid landscape was often perceived as dominated by the Turkish state and its institutions (including TIKA, TRC, AFAD and AKUT). When Gulf aid was acknowledged, it was typically seen as **assistance provided to the Turkish state**. This aid was sometimes perceived as ‘centralised’ or allocated to keep refugees in the ‘periphery’ through supporting projects inside Syria or border regions. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were mentioned by a smaller number of people as other Asian/Southern contributors, with Japan being the most frequently recognised, known for its professionalism and collaboration with local NGOs, although sometimes less visible than Western/UN donors.

In **Lebanon, including in Baddawi camp**, a **wide range of local, national, regional, and trans-regional responders** were identified. **Local community members and mosques** were consistently mentioned and highly valued, seen by some as representing **the only “real humanitarianism and generosity”**. Southern responders, including Gulf states/organisations and local organisations, were seen as significant actors in the camp’s aid landscape. Some rejected the notion of ‘new’ responders, perceiving ‘new’ organisations supporting refugees from Syria as simply continuing and expanding their historical roles supporting Palestinian refugees and Lebanese IDPs.

Evaluations and Critiques of Southern Aid Modalities: Refugees and local aid providers provided detailed critiques of Southern-led responses, often comparing them implicitly or explicitly to Northern-led ones. While acknowledging the contributions (“We owe them our sincere thanks and gratitude”), the critiques were often pointed.

Type and Form of Aid: Southern providers were often perceived as focusing on **funds and in-kind assistance** (food, cleaning supplies, clothes, blankets, mattresses). This was contrasted with Northern providers, who were seen as more involved in **education and hospitalization programs and supporting what were described as more productive projects**. There was a critique that Southern aid prioritised **material donations over financial aid (cash assistance)**, which some people felt was the most important form of aid for refugees.

“Seasonal” and “Sporadic” Nature: A frequent and significant critique was that aid from Southern states and national charities, especially from the Gulf, was **“seasonal,” “sporadic,”** and not **“permanent and continuous”** provision. Aid was often limited to specific times like winter, school seasons, or religious holidays. The intermittent nature of aid provision led some people to question whether such actors should even be classified as **“Service providers,”** as their role was seen as limited to **“rare and exceptional cases”**. This lack of continuity was seen as preventing aid from creating a **“healthy and sound human reality,”** as humans are entitled to dignity **“all days of the year, not only on religious holidays and special occasions”**.

Limited Reach and Impact: Despite the effort, seasonal and sporadic aid was perceived by some as reaching only a **“small number of refugees,”** compared to Northern-led aid which was believed to be more widely distributed. A common view amongst Syrian and Palestinian refugees alike was that such services were **not systematic** and could be considered **“useless” or “worthless”** due to their limited and intermittent nature. This frustration was linked to the perception that Gulf countries had significant capability to provide much more regular and higher quality aid.

Visibility and Logos: Critiques were directed at the **hypervisibility of Southern aid providers’ logos**. This over-branding was seen as an imposition, invading public and private spaces, and even dreams. While the intention might be to reinforce gratitude and recognition, the perception was often that donors were **“showing off,”** which was broadly rejected by interviewees. This practice stood in stark contrast to what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh refers to as the highly valued **“poetics of undisclosed care”** associated with informal, community-based responses, where discretion and anonymity in giving were seen as embodying true humanitarianism and aligning with religious teachings.

“Policy of Remote Aid”: This critique had two key dimensions.

- Firstly, the **absence of direct implementation** by individuals from the Gulf or other Southern countries themselves. Aid was often delivered through **local intermediaries** (ie. Lebanese or Palestinian institutions, or Syrian or Palestinian representatives). While some people in Lebanon critiqued this remoteness, finding value in more direct relationships, interlocutors in Türkiye offered a different view, appreciating that Arab and Malaysian donors **“don’t interfere in our work like the Northern donors do,”** which offered local NGOs and refugee-led organisations greater freedom and flexibility. This suggests that the *mode* of remote engagement matters – remote funding with local autonomy was valued in some contexts.
- Secondly, and critically, was the **“politics of Gulf countries keeping refugees ‘at a distance’ by providing assistance to refugees living in neighbouring countries but not providing asylum within their own territories”**. Refugees repeatedly stressed that what they need most is **“security and safety”** and opportunities for **asylum and resettlement**. They challenged Southern states, particularly the Gulf countries, to **“open their borders”** and facilitate movement, just as some Northern countries had done.

Desired Roles and Alternative Models: Despite the critiques, people with refugee backgrounds articulated the roles that they believed Southern responders should take. Some felt that the roles played by Southern actors should be **distinguished and competitive**, taking a position in the **“foreground”** rather than following Northern actors, leveraging their capabilities to respond independently. However, most people believed that Southern responders in the “foreground” should not dismiss the responsibilities of Northern states. Southern aid was often conceptualised as **“complementing” Northern services**, providing **“added value” or “consolation aid”** rather than replacing the roles played by actors like the UN. The **way aid is provided was repeatedly seen as being as, if not more important, than the material assistance itself**. The value of **continuity** was stressed as defining **“effective”** response.

The Full Report highlights examples of transregional Southern responses that offer alternative models of response which were valued by refugees. **Brazil’s humanitarian visa program** offered an alternative to the provision of aid in the region, providing informal opportunities for **resettlement**, which refugees saw as part of a strategy to help themselves. This was seen as a **major difference from forms of Southern assistance** that did not offer asylum. Similarly, **Cuba’s educational migration program** was highly valued for providing opportunities for professional development and fostering self-sufficiency, going beyond emergency aid. These examples demonstrate how Southern actors with varying income levels and geopolitical power can provide responses that address fundamental needs and rights like safety, security, legal status, and opportunities for self-sufficiency, which are deeply prioritised by displaced people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, refugees' views reveal a complex picture of Southern responses to displacement. While acknowledging significant financial and material contributions, particularly from Gulf states, their critiques focused on the **modality of aid provision** – specifically its **seasonality, intermittence, lack of needs-based systematisation, over-branding, and the 'remoteness' of donors** both in terms of direct engagement and, crucially, in the **failure to offer asylum or resettlement opportunities**. These critiques underscore refugees' desire for **more consistent, dignified, relationship-based, and rights-focused responses** that address their needs and rights for safety, security, legal status, and opportunities for self-sufficiency, aligning Southern responses with the principles of solidarity and shared experience often invoked in discussions about the meaning of the South.

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Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria: Project Reports

Research Reports:

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye and beyond: Full Report* (SOURCED project and Migration Research Unit: UCL).

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *Transregional Responses to Displacement: Aid, Advocacy and Accountability: Research Report* (SOURCED project and Migration Research Unit, UCL). Also published in Arabic

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *South-South Cooperation: Diplomatic and Humanitarian Responses to Conflict and Displacement: Workshop Report* (SOURCED project, Migration Research Unit, UCL and Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, CHS).

Research and Policy Notes

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *Meanings of the South and Refugees' Views and Critiques of Southern Responses to Displacement: Research Note #1* (SOURCED project and Migration Research Unit, UCL)

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *Transregional Responses to Displacement: Aid, Advocacy and Accountability: Research Note #2* (SOURCED project and Migration Research Unit, UCL).

Elkahlout, G. and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2025) *South-South Cooperation: Diplomatic and Humanitarian Responses to Conflict and Displacement: Policy Brief* (SOURCED project, Migration Research Unit, UCL and Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, CHS)

