

# Supporting Refugee-Led Frameworks: a Response to COVID-19

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*We need support in all areas but at this moment soaps and education are the most important thing that our community is in need of. Also, I want to speak for women in Gaga camp. We need education to fight violence and to educate. We face a lot of things here in the camp and we need help to change things for the better. We can not do it alone or with no education or basic needs in our lives.*

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**- Refugee leader in Chad**



iACT's refugee-led COVID-19 response was made possible by hundreds of individuals worldwide, Pam K. Omidyar, Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and a grant from Open Society Foundations.

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**The onset of COVID-19** in March of 2020 brought with it the devastating realization of the disproportionate impact this virus may have on refugee and displaced communities. These members of our global community are already living on the brink, largely forgotten and pushed aside, with limited resources and who already face daily uncertainty.

Like schools and youth programs globally, iACT's refugee-led sports, education, and human rights programs were suspended. However, iACT teachers, coaches, and leaders did not stop working. Instead, they pivoted their efforts from existing programs to a public health response. In many ways, iACT's refugee-led approach—which deepens the existing capacity of refugees to be the primary decision-makers and program managers—prepared our paid staff members for this very moment. As the global humanitarian system slowed to a halt and international staff were unable to travel, iACT's staff continued to safely work, applying leadership and community organizing skills to meet their community's immediate needs: a response to COVID-19.



## Coordinating a Response

On March 19, 2020, iACT created a Refugee Response WhatsApp (a free messaging application) group with iACT refugee staff, men and women, in several different refugee camps in Chad, Cameroon, Tanzania, and Greece. While the primary language of exchange was English, other languages were used to foster global connections among refugees from different countries.

The most immediate and apparent need that surfaced from all the leaders was for consistent and accurate information. Misinformation and rumors about the novel Coronavirus and how best to prevent its spread were rampant. Global recommendations about social distancing and quarantining inside homes were and continue to be nearly impossible in remote, rural camps where families must leave each day to retrieve essential items such as water. It was clear that refugees and displaced communities were being left behind in the world's response to COVID-19.

iACT's first step was to coordinate a global network of experts including refugee leaders to create and translate eight different documents that provided in-depth guidelines regarding Coronavirus, its symptoms, transmission, treatment/care, proper hand-washing techniques, facts versus myths, and guides for parents/caregivers and community leaders. Each document was translated in up to 14 different languages: Arabic, Burmese, Dinka, English, Farsi, French, Karen, Kirundi, Kurmanji, Nepali, Nuer, Sorani, Spanish, and Swahili. The first document, a multi-page information packet containing virus facts and dispelling myths, was sent to refugee communities on March 19, 2020. The series of Coronavirus Facts and Precautions documents remains available on the iACT website as well as in shareable Google Drive folders for groups and organizations to access and adapt for their own communities.

iACT moved quickly to begin raising cash assistance so that local refugee leaders would have funds to purchase needed equipment and hygiene materials, and print and distribute information guides. Refugee leaders quickly assessed their local markets for health and hygiene materials, visited clinics, found community members who could make soap, and met with camp leaders to strategize. Their assessment of gaps and costs informed iACT's online campaign that raised \$25,000, 100% of which was sent directly to refugee leaders to use towards their local response.





Over an eight-month COVID-19 response period, iACT conducted four different surveys through WhatsApp to learn more about each leader's personal needs and their community's needs, remaining gaps in information, the emotional impact of the virus, and other challenges that they were facing. Another WhatsApp group, Safe iACT Programs, was created to specifically address reopening sports and education programs with limited funds and resources. iACT's global network provided a framework including key questions to be discussed locally and examples of what programs worldwide were doing in order to safely reopen. Using global guidelines and best practices, refugee leaders created unique reopening plans and protocols that best fit their community. Today, plans continue to evolve and communication between iACT and among refugee leaders remains open and consistent.

*“The message I would like to share with people around the world is that the virus is in the air and everybody could get it (young people, old people, children, rich or poor, prisoners, refugees, those who are citizens, and even the president). So while waiting on a vaccine or drug we must respect the hygiene rules and regulations. Also, this situation makes us know that we're equal. It depends not where you live or what is your status. WE GONNA BE TOGETHER AS ONE.”*

**-Refugee Leader in Greece**

The continued leadership of iACT's staff and their pivot from managing sports, education, and human rights programs, to leading the COVID-19 response in their community amplify the role that refugees can and should play in a humanitarian and emergency response. It also underscores the need for those of us working in the humanitarian field to reassess our roles.

**The following elements of a refugee-led framework were overwhelmingly apparent and central to iACT supporting a refugee-led response to COVID-19.**

- Communication and connection are essential.
- Investing in refugee leadership transcends programs.
- Global teamwork is necessary to meet the unique and growing needs of communities on the move.
- Refugee-led impact relies on trust and accountability.

# Communication and connection are essential.

Access to communication technology and information is an essential human right in the 21st century. For individuals and communities whose dignity is not always seen and who face uncertainty at every point in their displacement, the ability to express their needs, form connections, and be part of meaningful action is essential. Refugees have a voice and the right for that voice to be heard. As a humanitarian action organization, we have always felt that a direct line of communication with refugee staff is vital. The right to communicate and access accurate information is even more apparent amidst COVID-19. Direct lines of communication with leaders help inform donors and experts about the unique, immediate, and shifting needs of refugee and displaced community members. It is access to communication technology—cell phones, mobile networks, and low-data applications like WhatsApp—that lead to the ability to support a refugee-led response. While we have provided direct cash assistance to our leaders to purchase items that met their community’s most immediate COVID-19 needs, we have also sent cash assistance for communication.

WhatsApp communication between leaders from different countries proved to be extremely beneficial, despite language barriers. Each day, team members from Chad, Cameroon, Tanzania, and Greece shared an outpouring of photos, videos, and updates about their efforts on the Refugee Response WhatsApp group. Leaders sent almost 3,900 photos documenting their efforts to each other. They exchanged strategy ideas and shared the evolution of their efforts based on the shifting needs of their local communities. Information on how each of their communities was coping and messages of hope, praise, and encouragement were posted almost daily between March and July.

*“We have created many WhatsApp group chats here in [refugee camps] Nduta and Mtendeli. Truthfully, this method is helping us a lot sharing the information, including Facebook.”*

**-Refugee Leader in Tanzania**

Refugee Leader in Cameroon

“Hi friends, I wanted to thank all the iACT team in the world starting with that of the United States then that of Chad, that of Tanzania and that of Greece including those who work with iACT in the four corners of the world because they are helping mankind to prevent the spread of COVID-19 which is a scourge currently plaguing the world. May God bless you.”

Refugee Leader in Greece

“This is nothing, my brother. This is the iACT family and spirit. The fight goes on.”

Refugee Leader in Cameroon

“It’s true the fight continues, my brother, courage. Thanks to you.”

When WhatsApp was blocked in Chad starting in late July, iACT leaders in Darfuri refugee camps were no longer able to communicate with us, nor with each other. In October, the government of Chad made WhatsApp available again and one leader excitedly shared in the Refugee Response group, “Hi guys today we are back in the world with internet in eastern Chad so I'm very excited and I hope you are doing well.” Another leader shared, “Hello dear friends, it was so long a time that we were out of connection, because of an unknown reason. Now our network is back. I hope it can keep working and does not cut again. So here we are.”

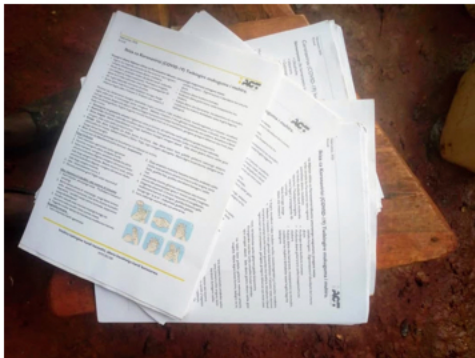
Every human needs connection and deserves access to communication. For communities who have been forcibly displaced and who live with uncertainty each day, communication is even more essential. COVID-19 underscored this. It also presented an opportunity for a global network of leaders—refugee and non-refugee alike—to connect and unite in support of each other.

## Investing in refugee leadership transcends programs.

Without knowing it, iACT was preparing refugee leaders to respond to such an emergency like COVID-19 all along. iACT recognizes the unique assets and inherent capacities that all people bring to interpersonal relationships and community-wide programs. As in any organization anywhere in the world, iACT invests in the professional and leadership development of our refugee and non-refugee staff and volunteers as well as in building the organizational capacity and flexible structures that support the programs that staff members lead. For programs and projects in refugee communities, this investment is even more essential, as it prepares the community to be able to effectively and rapidly respond to unfolding emergencies with agility, confidence.

Since the temporary suspension of iACT's sports and education programs, all of the teachers, coaches, cooks, and coordinators have now become public health leaders on the frontlines of preparing their communities for the Coronavirus. This transformation has been impressively seamless for these leaders.

Apart from meeting the need for information by creating and translating the series of Coronavirus Facts and Precautions documents, all decision-making was in the hands of local leaders. Since the onset of the global pandemic, iACT's refugee staff members expanded upon the trust and relationships they had built through regular programs to coordinate with local NGOs, religious networks, and formal and informal camp leaders to organize systematic zone outreach. As practiced in all of iACT's work, staff members reflected on their efforts, tried new ideas, and regularly improved upon their organizing and outreach. They identified and prioritized vulnerable community members. They organized committees, trained leaders, and modeled good health and hygiene practices and COVID-19 precautionary behaviors.



*“Today my team and I distributed another two hundred copies of iACT fact sheets around two large zones, zone 19 and zone 20. I also successfully trained zone leaders of those zones about iACT fact sheets.”*

**-Refugee Leader in Tanzania**

iACT leaders walked their camps of between 15,000 and 75,000 residents and informed hundreds of families one at a time. In refugee camps Nduta and Mtendeli in Tanzania, leaders were challenged by sprawling camps of 3,700 to 8,200 acres (5 to 12 square miles). When asked what more iACT could do to support, leaders in both camps suggested bicycles. A \$200 investment in two bicycles increased outreach from 100-150 households per day to 600 -1,000 households. Based on self-reported feedback from refugee camp-based staff in late May of 2020, an average of 56% of the refugee camp population was reached during the first 10 weeks of the COVID-19 response.



During the WhatsApp blackout in Chad, Darfuri refugee staff members continued to work and walked to nearby farms, sometimes 40 kilometers away, to discuss COVID-19 and distribute essential materials. Although communication with U.S.-based iACT team members was impeded, refugee leaders continue to apply the skills they had developed through leading sports, education, and human rights programs to their relentless COVID-19 efforts.

Refugee leaders simultaneously distributed and collected information. The iACT Tanzania team initiated a household survey to better understand what information the community had and from where it was coming. The leaders then used this information to adjust their approach. Through reflection, they discovered that 70% of outreach was focused on women who are the primary head of households in their camps. The team adjusted by ensuring that female team members were front and center in their outreach efforts:



*“We’ve been doing an incredible job together with [Refugees United Soccer Academy] coach Jeanette. I always thank her for the bravery and willingness she has shown us in this work of serving our community.”*

**-Refugee Leader in Tanzania**





Despite our team on the ground being adept at centering female voices, we recognize the gaps in direct communication between iACT's female refugee camp-based leaders in Chad, Cameroon, and Tanzania and our U.S.-based staff. Much of their thoughts, opinions, and ideas are shared indirectly with us through iACT male leadership. As we move forward, iACT seeks to overcome this challenge and work more directly with female leadership, which is the case in Greece.



iACT's investment in leadership and professional development clearly prepared staff members and volunteer leaders to respond to COVID-19. Further, the surveys, education, and distribution of materials initiated and led by the local leaders continue to have an impact beyond COVID-19:

*Hygiene is very important in our daily life. Two days ago, I visited Mtendeli hospital. I found that diseases caused by poor hygiene are now reducing. I think that this is one of the results of our surveys organized by iACT around the world. Handwashing, keeping distance between us, wearing masks, and mindfulness are very necessary in this period. If possible, just speak with your family, partners, and communities about nutrients. I think this can reduce death.*

*Thank you iACT,*

*Thank you Donors,*

*Thank you, refugee leaders, together as one, families will still be safe, strong, and healthy!*

**-Refugee Leader in Tanzania**

# Global teamwork is necessary to meet the unique and growing needs of communities on the move.

*“Hello my friend Gabriel! First of all thank you for your great iACT programs that teach the refugees the meaning of life like mindfulness, fun, learn, sharing, peace, helping, leadership, human rights These principles, if not for iACT, we would not hear about it. One reality before the Coronavirus, health is an important topic in the program. iACT teaches teachers, cooks, coaches, and all the staff how to wash hands with soap. It is important before doing anything, and after, and how to cough. This all means how we can kill germs and protect ourselves. This high level of health, if not for iACT, I think it will not be possible for refugees or for us. And this is a short example about the activities of iACT. So I wanted to express my feeling about your support. I can not because thank you is not enough but I have to say thank you.”*

**-Refugee Leader in Chad**

As a global community, we're still leaving refugees, immigrants, migrant workers, and people on the move behind, and our response to this pandemic is an unfortunate affirmation of that. The global response to and recommendations for Coronavirus largely did not include or take into consideration the unique situation of people on the move. The communities we work with live in remote and isolated places without access to consistent or quality healthcare, nutrition, or health and hygiene materials. Even in Greece, which is less rural, refugee and asylum seekers were oftentimes forced into lockdowns not imposed on local Greeks and without access to essential supplies. Many families did not have soap, let alone access to sanitizers and cleaners. Sheltering in place for communities who struggle to meet their daily needs, including retrieving water from community water points and collecting distributed food rations, is not an option.



In response, iACT created a global team consisting of refugees, translators, public health officials, epidemiologists, psychologists, mindfulness teachers, and experts in disaster preparedness, community organizing, and child development. At the onset of the pandemic, and throughout the creation of iACT's Coronavirus Facts and Precautions, documents we asked iACT's refugee camp-based staff and volunteers questions such as, "How can we support you?", "Are their other refugee-led coordinated efforts", and "Does everyone in your camp have access to soap and water?" Grounded in their feedback, the global team adjusted available recommendations and information so that it made sense in densely populated settings with limited resources. As we translated and distributed information, more organizations and networks reached out to use them. Among others, these included Jesuit Refugee Service of the Great Lakes Region, Plan International-Tanzania, Shramik Sanjal (representing Nepali migrant workers), Teach for All, a Connecticut-based (USA) migrant farmworker healthcare program, Young Adult Empowerment Initiative for South Sudanese, Zolberg Institute for Migration and Mobility, and Foundation for Youth Initiatives, South Sudan in Kenya.



The global network of experts created to respond to COVID-19 represents a unique yet replicable approach to humanitarian aid and response. Refugees, immigrants, migrants, and people on the move are experts in their community. They know which strategies for communication and outreach will work, and they can almost immediately identify, or know how to identify, which needs should be prioritized. By connecting refugee experts with those who are experts in their own fields such as public health, infectious disease, and prevention, or child development, a global team working collaboratively can be effective and meet the actual needs of displaced communities and people on the move.



# Refugee-led impact relies on trust and accountability.

Providing ongoing, remote support, as a means to recognize the agency and voice of refugee staff, has always been part of iACT's approach to challenge top-down models of humanitarian aid. Restricted in our homes and unable to travel ourselves, this element of our work has now become the only means of connection to the communities and our sole pathway to support them. As COVID began to sweep through countries worldwide, the iACT team in Chad, Tanzania, Cameroon, and Greece adjusted to the reality of the moment and demonstrated the strength of refugee leadership.

*“Our ancestors always said unity is strength and separation is weakness. What do I want to mean? I mean that we work closely with the team of Mtendeli refugee camp. I mean the team that's led by our dear friend, John-Baptist. So from tomorrow onwards, Sir Gabriel and Ma'am Katie-Jay, we expect to work tirelessly to make sure all the information reaches out to everyone here in both camps. In my opinion, the one and only way that helps us spread the information quickest are visiting homes and distributing iACT fact sheets. Now almost everyone knows iACT even when we walk by people begin calling us and tell us the fact sheets that we gave them are helping them so much just like a reminder of how to take precautions.”*

**-Refugee Leader in camp Nduta, Tanzania**

When WhatsApp lines were down in Chad, our virtual presence wasn't necessary to continue the vital community outreach they were already doing. One Darfuri refugee leader shared they had gone out into the farms:

*“Here is a part of our response to COVID-19 in Goz Amer camp. And as our community moved to their farms, away from the camp, we were proud to find them on farms, for Coronavirus response. Sometimes we go farther than 43 Km, people are very happy by the work of iACT.”*

**-Refugee Leader in Chad**



Through trusted allies, we continued to send cash transfers to Darfuri refugee leaders even though we were not able to communicate with them directly. As a humanitarian organization, our growth in impact is directly related to the shared trust between members of our global team of staff and volunteers. Similarly, while we of course maintain transparency with our donors, we believe our accountability is first and foremost to the refugee communities with whom we work alongside. This begins with listening and is supported through ongoing, compassionate communication. Refugees' voices and opinions influence and shape our daily tasks and the direction of our organization as a whole. At our core, iACT believes in facilitating refugee leadership and cultivating sustainable support to meet their needs.

*"Thank you iACT and especially the international staff, from Sudanese people and particularly people of western Darfur state. I have shared with them the COVID-19 prevention documents and they have said it's really valuable information. They formed a committee and started informing others. We as iACT have a big positive impact in the world and our messages are still sharing somewhere in the world. We have a big appreciation from the world which is unknown to us. I thank you team for your generous contribution against COVID-19. You have saved millions of human spirits through the COVID-19 document prevention that we have shared with the rest of the world. We are leaders and we want to work hard enough until the end of COVID-19."*

**-Refugee Leader in Chad**

Further, iACT believes that the impact of our humanitarian response should be grounded in process-based outcomes. The quality of impact should not be measured solely by how many bars of soap have been distributed, but by how our refugee team is reaching their community and iterating upon that engagement; this is a measurement of success. We know that they are reaching as many people as they can. They share with us their ideas and strategies to improve outreach efforts and connect with the most vulnerable first. Despite the fact that we do not ask for detailed reports, our team updates us daily on their efforts. While they share the number of boxes of soap purchased and distributed, copies made, and families reached because they are proud, it is also important to know whether iACT's U.S.-based and global network is supporting our refugee leaders in the areas they need. This is also a measurement of our success.

The relationships formed between iACT's global team members are built on trust and commitment. We hold each other accountable while centering each person and the community's wellbeing. It is this foundation that creates exponential, refugee-led impact in camps and communities that are oftentimes uncertain, volatile, and isolated. The community members among us who have been forcibly displaced from their homes do not have the privilege of waiting out COVID-19. Each day they struggle to meet their daily, essential needs while maintaining hope for a better future and working to support their communities.

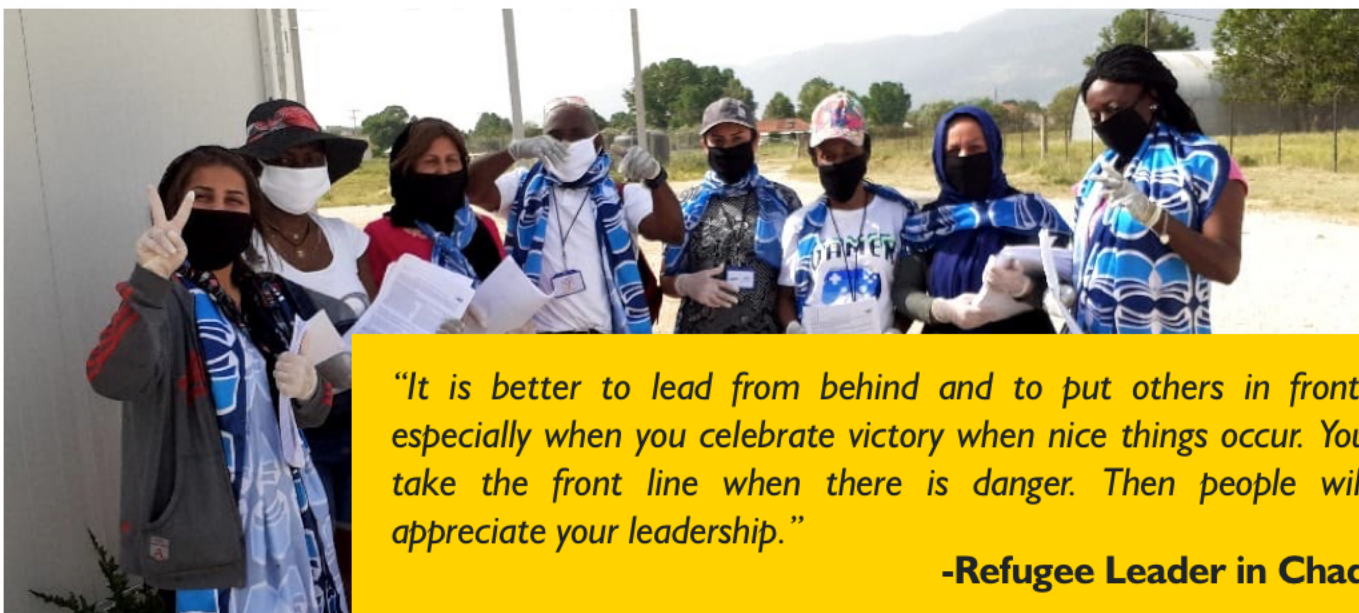


# Refugee-led frameworks: Moving forward

The disruptions and challenges caused by COVID-19 highlight how humanitarianism's traditional top-down, rigid models of aid fail to meet the needs of refugee communities. Moreover, in failing to acknowledge the agency and voice of displaced people, top-down humanitarian practices omit critical opportunities to learn from people on the move about how daily challenges and inequalities within displacement are endured, and in turn, how humanitarian actors can better act in solidarity with people on the move to lessen such injustices.

Perhaps now more than ever, the circumstances of COVID-19 present us with an opportunity to question and rethink how humanitarian aid is designed, implemented, and replicated. Are we recognizing and acting in acknowledgment of the agency and voice of displaced persons? Are we listening to and placing displaced persons at the center of our response and programs? Are we ensuring our practices and programs are centered on needs and solutions identified by people on the move and ensuring we are seeing people on the move as active, critical actors in our responses?

iACT's refugee-led COVID-19 response sought to center these questions and therefore disrupt traditional humanitarian models. This began by first listening to the needs of refugee communities, followed by global collaboration to provide informational and financial support to address community-identified needs. Then, refugee staff had the means to lead a public health response that was made possible through mutual trust and accountability and transparent, open communication between iACT's refugee and non-refugee staff. This included a willingness to embrace flexible responses depending on varying challenges across the geographies and circumstances in which refugees live. iACT seeks to recognize areas of improvement in this process and learn from these opportunities to continue to disrupt top-down humanitarian practices. In doing so, we can build more collaborative, global networks where equity, trust, and accountability are at the center. Now is the time to support refugee-led leadership. This is the way forward.



*“It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership.”*

**-Refugee Leader in Chad**