

Understanding Collective (In)action: Bringing Agency into the Study of Refugee Community Organisations

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NGOs, policymakers, and local governments are increasingly encouraging refugees to establish Community Organisations (COs). These development actors provide funding and capacity building for COs with the aim of harnessing them to foster refugee input and participation in development activities. This strategy assumes that refugees have a stable, pre-existing desire to mobilise collectively and they simply require the resources and political opportunities to do so. This paper deconstructs and challenges this assumption through research on the mobilisation of Sudanese and Eritrean communities in Israel. It argues that the desire to mobilise collectively is a dynamic function of collective identity, and must therefore be considered a key

determinant of mobilisation. Despite comparable resources and opportunities, the Sudanese community has nine active COs while the Eritrean community has only one. Where the politicised collective bonds of the former incentivised the community to capitalise on resources and opportunities to establish COs and participate in development programs, the de-politicised bonds of the later led to the growth of internally oriented business and cultural associations. These findings suggest that development actors must rethink their engagement with refugee communities. Fostering refugee participation primarily through funding and encouraging COs is an inadvertently exclusionary practice, as not all communities have the collective desire to establish them.