

Who helps refugees in South Africa? Examining the social and cultural factors

Charitable organisations and individuals in South Africa have provided philanthropic support to refugees for many years. This includes volunteering their time, providing material support and giving information to help refugees integrate into local communities. But who are these givers and what motivates them to help? The HSRC's **Steven Gordon** explored this behaviour in a paper, summarised here by **Antoinette Oosthuizen**

Refugees in South Africa are expected to self-settle in local communities but struggle to integrate, access basic services and find employment. Many have also been subjected to xenophobic prejudice and violence. With little support from the state, charitable organisations and individuals have stepped in to assist them, playing a crucial role in their integration and making a valuable contribution to improving intergroup harmony in the country.

Understanding what motivates people to engage in pro-refugee philanthropy may help us to develop and improve interventions to encourage this type of behaviour.

However, much of the refugee support has been informal and by non-registered entities and individuals, and little research has been done on the characteristics of these people and the factors that drive their willingness to help.

Dr Steven Gordon of the HSRC looked at data from a large-scale Ipsos survey to explore three types of support behaviour: making material donations, volunteer activities and information sharing. His paper, [Who Helps Refugees in South Africa? An Examination of Cultural and Social Factors](#), was published in *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* in June 2022.

Who are refugees and their helpers?

The number of people who have applied for refugee status in South Africa grew substantially between 1990 and 2020. The United Nations Development Programme [estimates](#) that more than a quarter of a million people are currently in the process of applying for refugee status, most of them from Somalia, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, researchers believe the official statistics might underestimate the true numbers seeking refuge due to [backlogs](#) in the country's asylum and refugee system as well as the [corruption and mismanagement](#) of that system.

Many of the philanthropic support initiatives are driven by religious organisations such as Cape Town's Central Methodist Church, and local and international non-profit organisations, which are often founded and driven by migrants and refugees.

Hypotheses

Based on existing research on volunteering and non-profit organisations, Gordon tested four hypotheses to explain pro-refugee philanthropy in South Africa.

Research has shown that empathy is an important driver of charitable behaviour, but that people struggle to empathise with people from different social or cultural groups. Also, negative attitudes are more likely to occur when they see these groups as a threat. Data [published](#) by the HSRC showed many people saw refugees as an economic threat as well as deceitful and violent. Gordon hypothesised that viewing refugees as a threat would also reduce the likelihood of participation in pro-refugee philanthropic behaviour.

[Studies](#) suggest that peer pressure plays a role – people are less likely to refuse or disregard volunteer requests from people close to them. Therefore, the second hypothesis was that positive contact with people who do voluntary work for refugees would encourage an individual to do the same.

Thirdly, it is nearly impossible for an individual to monitor the impact of a charitable act or gift. They simply have to trust the institution to do the work. Based on the [research](#) that confidence in legal-political institutions can function as a proxy for confidence in philanthropic organisations, Gordon hypothesised that perceptions of political institutions as trustworthy would be positively associated with helping refugees.

Finally, [scholars](#) have shown that religiosity encourages



Committed to preserving dignity – Grace Beyond Borders (GBB) is an organisation concerned with alleviating hunger among foreign nationals who do not qualify for government relief programmes.
Source: GBB

values (such as gratitude, charity and caring) that promote prosocial behaviour. The fourth hypothesis was, therefore, that religious affiliation would improve the likelihood of individual participation in pro-refugee philanthropic behaviour.

Method

During October and November 2019, Ipsos market research firm conducted a survey of the adult population of Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Gauteng, where most of the country's refugees and asylum seekers live. Fieldworkers conducted interviews in households using each respondent's home language. The participants were asked a list of questions about the ways they had helped refugees in the previous year. About 18% of the 2004 respondents said they had.

To test if participants viewed refugees as a threat (the first hypothesis) they had to rate on a five-point scale if they 'agreed' or 'disagreed' that refugees were 'different' from them, 'violent', 'good', 'dishonest' or 'taking [their] jobs'. These items on the questionnaire were processed to create a 0–10 threat index. The higher respondents scored, the more negatively they viewed refugees. For testing the other hypotheses, the participants were asked if they were friends with volunteers; whether they trusted their national, provincial and local governments; and if they were religious (unaffiliated, non-Christian, Christian or 'uncertain').

Findings

Viewing refugees as a threat?

The refugee threat index was a robust predictor of people's willingness to help refugees. Even when a range of demographic and socioeconomic factors were controlled for, those who scored high on this index – therefore viewing refugees as a threat – were less likely to help. These demographic factors included age, race, education and employment status.

Being older, a student or unemployed reduced the probability of engaging in helpful action. Self-reported racial group status had no influence, but when the model was modified, it seemed that linguistic identity was a more powerful driver of charitable behaviour. Those who spoke English were more likely than Afrikaans speakers to help. Speakers of Setswana or isiXhosa were slightly keener to help, but there was little correlation with other languages.

'Given that most studies in South Africa have not examined linguistic identity as a predictor of charitable behaviour, this was an intriguing finding,' Gordon writes. Linguistic identity could be acting as a proxy for certain cultural or political values that influence charitable behaviour, or it could denote access to certain information networks affecting exposure to pro-refugee philanthropy.

Being friends with volunteers?

While positive contact with a volunteer improved the odds of helping a refugee, the reasons this happens may need to be explored. For example, we do not know if the volunteers were influencing new friends to be helpful or if charitable individuals merely seek like-minded friends by joining these volunteer networks.

Trusting the government?

Trusting political institutions decreased the odds of philanthropic action, even when the model was adjusted to account for political affiliation. According to Gordon, this might mean that trust in legal-political institutions may not be the best proxy for public confidence in pro-refugee charitable organisations. 'One could argue that disappointment with "normal politics" motivates people to become more engaged in philanthropy,' Gordon writes. This would be in line with an argument by [Arthur Brooks \(2007\)](#) that cynicism about the role of the government in assisting vulnerable groups increases the likelihood of charitable giving, and if people were happy with legal-political institutions, they would trust the state to look after refugees.

Religion?

Rejecting a religious orientation made an individual less likely to participate in pro-refugee philanthropy. It is unclear if this is driven by religious norms about altruistic behaviour or if religious groups simply have more access to networks that request aid. Those belonging to a non-Christian faith – in other words, belonging to a religious minority such as Islam, Judaism or Hinduism – were especially likely to help refugees. This is consistent with [previous research](#) that found people belonging to a religious minority are more likely to give to charity than those belonging to the religious majority.

The way forward

This study makes an important academic contribution to the limited research on pro-refugee philanthropy in South Africa. Scholars should build on these findings to help us understand why certain people help, Gordon writes. The findings could also help practitioners in the non-profit sector and others to promote this type of philanthropy and inform interventions that can increase public participation in actions that help refugees.

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Source: GBB