

From Helplessness to Self-help: Asylum Seeker-led Organization as a Platform to Address COVID-19 Support Policy Gaps in Hong Kong¹

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Abstract

This article describes, how a platform provided by asylum seeker-led organizations was used, to cope with challenges, faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence from Hong Kong, one of Asia's major cities, demonstrates the importance of asylum seeker-led response to inadequate and exclusionary government aid provisions. Although the pandemic exacerbated the existing plight of asylum seekers in Hong Kong, their resilience was instrumental in developing the asylum seeker community. Because they were excluded from most pandemic assistance measures, helplessness forced asylum seekers in Hong Kong to "self-help." They proactively utilized the platform provided by the Refugee Union, an asylum seeker-led organization in Hong Kong, to request and gather resources for themselves and advocate for better policies. These asylum seeker-led initiatives not only helped them cope with crises like the pandemic, but also opened up opportunities for them to reach out to other local communities and advocate for themselves, leading to greater social inclusion in the long run.

Key Words:

Asylum seekers; asylum seeker-led organizations; pandemic; refugees; resilience

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted everyday life for everyone, but the impact on lives and livelihoods has not been the same. For forced migrants, this pandemic has meant facing one disaster after another. Having fled persecution, conflict, violence, human rights abuses, or social upheaval in their home countries, the pandemic became their next struggle for survival. While much of the literature focused on the challenges faced by refugee or asylum seeker communities in developing regions (Bukuluki et al., 2020; Martuscelli, 2021; Moyo et al., 2021), little is known about such challenges in developed regions. This may be because people in developed regions are immune during the pandemic to problems faced by those in developing regions, although this is not necessarily true. In Hong Kong, one of Asia's largest cities, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the difficulties faced by the local asylum seeker community. Asylum seekers were excluded from most pandemic assistance efforts and had little place to seek help. While existing literature focuses on the challenges refugee or asylum seeker communities

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face, we have limited understanding of how they respond to these challenges (in other words, their “agency”), during turbulent times.

This article contributes to understanding how refugees or asylum seekers have used the platform provided by refugee- or asylum seeker-led organizations to cope with the challenges faced by them during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on experiences in Hong Kong. The author conducted ethnographic observation at the Refugee Union, an asylum seeker-led organization in Hong Kong, between January 2020 and April 2022. He has been volunteering at this organization since July 2018. At first glance, the findings from Hong Kong highlight the importance of asylum seeker-led response to the inadequate and exclusionary provision of government assistance. Excluded from most pandemic assistance efforts, asylum seekers in Hong Kong proactively used the “self-help” platform provided by the Refugee Union. They used social media to reach out to other local communities, while strict infection control measures prohibited group gatherings. They also used tactics such as online crowdfunding for donations from other local communities and electronic petitions to advocate for better policies. The Hong Kong experience has again demonstrated the roles of refugee- or asylum seeker-led organizations in addressing gaps in services, reaching out to other local communities, and encouraging refugees or asylum seekers to participate in policy discussions that affect them.

2 The Situation of Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong before the Pandemic

Forced displacement is a major global challenge today. In 2021, about 89.3 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, mainly due to conflict, persecution, violence, human rights violations, and social upheaval. Nearly half of them were displaced from their country of origin, such as Syria (6.8 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.4 million), and Myanmar (1.2 million) (UNHCR, 2022). Hong Kong is one of the many places where forcibly displaced persons are seeking refuge. According to official figures, about 15,000 people are currently seeking protection in Hong Kong (The Standard, 2023). According to an asylum seeker informant, some 50 percent of them are from South Asia, 30 percent from Southeast Asia, and 10 percent from Africa. While Hong Kong is a signatory to the 1984 United Nations Convention Against Torture, it is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Hence, Hong Kong is merely a “way station” for asylum seekers (people awaiting a decision on their application) and refugees (people whose claims is substantiated and who are awaiting resettlement). In this article, the term “asylum seekers” refers to both asylum seekers and refugees. The author chose this terminology due to the fact that the majority of individuals seeking protection in Hong Kong are asylum seekers. Although asylum seekers apply for protection upon arrival in Hong Kong, many remain stranded in the city for decades due to the lengthy legal process.

Although Hong Kong is one of the wealthiest places in the world, there is no financial security for the local asylum seeker community. For many asylum seekers, Hong Kong is another struggle for survival. Asylum seekers in Hong Kong are generally prohibited by law from working and rely solely on a limited monthly stipend of HK\$3,200 (US\$408) to survive. The stipend is composed of HK\$1,500 as a rent subsidy, HK\$1,200 as a food subsidy, HK\$300 for utilities, and HK\$200 for transportation costs. Children receive half of this amount. The Social Welfare Department has contracted the Hong Kong International Social Service, an international nongovernmental organization, to provide these stipends (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). The stipend is one-sixth of the local median wage (Census and Statistics Department, 2022). In Hong Kong, the cheapest apartment without

windows costs at least HK\$3,000. The stipend alone is far from enough to survive in Hong Kong, one of the places with the highest cost of living in the world (The Standard, 2022). Therefore, these asylum seekers often seek help from churches, charities, and other local aid organizations in the form of donations.

3 Challenges Faced by Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong during the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the difficulties faced by asylum seekers in Hong Kong. The first wave of the pandemic in Hong Kong began in January 2020, and the number of infections and deaths has fluctuated since then. Hong Kong encountered five waves of outbreaks from 2020 to 2022. At the time of writing, over 2.8 million infections and 13,400 deaths have been recorded (HKUMed, 2023). For a city with a population of only 7.33 million (Census and Statistics Department, 2023), these infection and death figures are significant. However, this is not the first time Hong Kong has faced large-scale epidemics. In 2003, the SARS coronavirus outbreak resulted in nearly 1,700 infections and 300 deaths (Hong Kong Free Press, 2017). Hong Kong residents learned from this experience and became cautious. Many put on their face masks and tried to buy food, essentials, and protective gear, causing shortages and skyrocketing prices. As confirmed cases increased, people began panic buying, fearing that stricter infection control measures would be put in place, which has been the case in recent years. For the people in Hong Kong, the worst-case scenario meant a lockdown and mandatory testing, similar to that in mainland Chinese cities (Financial Times, 2022).

As fear grew, rumors spread. Instead of worrying about getting infected, asylum seekers in Hong Kong first had to worry about staying prepared. Some asylum seekers the author spoke with at the Refugee Union center recalled having little access to essentials such as food and protective gear, especially face masks, during the early stages of the pandemic. Panic buying was not the only reason that prevented them from getting these items; restrictive refugee policies also played a role. In Hong Kong, asylum seekers receive their food money in the form of "ration cards," that cannot be exchanged to cash. With these cards they can only shop at the ParknShop supermarket (one of the largest supermarket chains in Hong Kong). From asylum seekers' perspective, the ration card policy reflected a sense of mistrust. It also limited their ability to buy goods from cheaper places, such as street markets. The inadequacy of the ration card policy was most evident during the outbreak. Panic buying led to a shortage of food and other essentials in supermarkets, resulting in asylum seekers finding only empty shelves in supermarkets and little to eat despite having food cards.

However, the local asylum seeker community was most affected, as they were excluded from most assistance and had nowhere to turn for help. Under normal circumstances, asylum seekers could turn to aid organizations in the neighborhood, but many of these organizations were temporarily closed due to the pandemic, especially as the number of infection cases increased. Asylum seekers attempted to contact their caseworkers assigned by the International Social Service for assistance, but several complained that their caseworkers did not return their calls. This was particularly the case during the fifth wave outbreak (between December 2021 and April 2022), when chaos reigned in Hong Kong: Public facilities and health services were overwhelmed with over 10,000 confirmed cases per day. The local asylum seeker community was also not eligible to receive relief

packages from the Hong Kong government, such as the consumption voucher program, because they did not have legal status. Although COVID-19 is non-discriminatory, the Hong Kong government did not consider asylum seekers for vaccination until several months after the program began (South China Morning Post, 2021).

4 From Being Helpless to an Attempt at “Self-help”

The state of helplessness promoted asylum seekers in Hong Kong to stand up for themselves. In February 2020, as the second wave of the outbreak approached, dozens of asylum seekers, who were also members of the Refugee Union gathered and submitted their petition to the Social Welfare Department. They urged to the Hong Kong government to increase support to help them cope with the unexpected challenges of the pandemic. Similar policy advocacy activities also took place in 2014, when the group pressured the local government to improve the rights of asylum seekers and successfully requested the Hong Kong government to increase aid. This movement also led to the formation of the Refugee Union, which became the first and only asylum seeker-led organization in Hong Kong (Vecchio & Ham, 2018). Although the group did not achieve the expected results this time, as no changes were made to the support levels, the asylum seeker community in Hong Kong still saw a silver lining in the form of neighborhood support.

Since group gatherings were not allowed due to the worsening pandemic, Refugee Union members used social media to reach out to other local communities and continue their political advocacy activities. They wrote about the hardships faced by many asylum seekers in Hong Kong and how they were marginalized, and the content was later published on the group’s social media pages and official website. The group also used some tactics for the first time, such as an online crowdfunding campaign and an electronic petition calling for the abolition of the ration card policy. The former was launched during the pandemic to raise money in neighborhoods so that asylum seekers could buy food and other essentials at stores where these items were still available.

These attempts at “self-help” led by the asylum seeker community receive public attention. An increasing number of people became aware of the needs of asylum seekers in Hong Kong and were willing to help them with donations of money and goods or to share their stories. “We see more and more new faces stopping by our center. There are more faces of individual donors and more faces from local residents who are Hong Kong Chinese,” one of the leaders at the Refugee Union said. The Refugee Union center stayed open when other local relief organizations were not in service, becoming a place where donations were distributed and collected. Some other groups and individuals chose to support these asylum seeker-led initiatives through virtual means, such as the online crowdfunding campaign and electronic petition.

5 Concluding Thoughts

In this article, the author uses the experience in Hong Kong to show how asylum seekers used the platform provided by an asylum seeker-led organization to address the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Asylum seekers in Hong Kong proactively utilized the platform provided by the Refugee Union to request and gather resources for themselves and to advocate for better policies. These findings are consistent with previous studies that found refugee- or asylum seeker-led organizations often function as alternative service providers for refugees or asylum seekers when official

government support is inadequate (Bloch, 2002), and as platforms for them to connect with other groups and engage in issues in the host context (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). Although the pandemic inevitably aggravated the hardships faced by asylum seekers in Hong Kong, their resilience became an important factor in the development of the asylum seeker community. These asylum seeker-led “self-help” initiatives not only helped them cope with crises like the pandemic, but also expanded the channels for them through which they could reach out to other local communities and advocate for themselves, with positive long-term effects on their social inclusion.

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