

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

# Humanitarian Innovation and Refugee Protection in East Africa and Yemen

*Dr Jeremy Gareth Taylor*



The world's displaced population has soared over the last decade, almost doubling to reach more than 82 million people according to a 2020 United Nations Refugee Agency report.

At least half of these people are children, who have been displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights abuses. This is a global crisis, with displaced people left vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including further disruption to their livelihoods and violation of their basic human rights. The Covid-19 pandemic has added an extra layer of challenges, further weakening the resilience of these already highly vulnerable communities.

There is a pressing need for fast and effective interventions to help safeguard the rights and wellbeing of these communities, while at the same time strengthening their resilience and coping mechanisms. Dr Jeremy Gareth Taylor, a Commonwealth Alumnus from South Africa who completed a PhD in International Relations at SOAS University of London is a leading researcher and humanitarian advocate who works towards improving understanding of the complex and diverse set of challenges facing displaced groups. His advocacy work aims to influence shifts in policies to improve conditions for refugees and displaced people, through the provision of vital services including shelter, health facilities, and education.



**Dr Jeremy Gareth Taylor** is a Commonwealth Alumnus who studied for a PhD in International Relations at SOAS University of London. On completion of his studies in 2015, he joined the Norwegian Refugee Council as a conflict analyst and is now the organisation's Head of Advocacy, Media and Communications for East Africa and Yemen. In this role, he is responsible for influencing the strategic approach and ensuring evidence-based materials and messages are shared with relevant decision-makers. Leading humanitarian advocacy work across ten countries, Jeremy has contributed to the implementation of global policies on refugee rights and global initiatives such as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which consists of a comprehensive set of commitments that are to be implemented in situations where there are large-scale movements of refugees.

## The Humanitarian Advocate

With a background in political science and a passion for human rights, Jeremy took up his Commonwealth Scholarship in 2012 to study for a PhD in International Relations at SOAS University of London, focusing on understanding Japan's presence and engagement in South Sudan.

'I was motivated to do a PhD as a challenge, the opportunity to study abroad and the benefit it could have for future career development.'

Upon completion of his studies in the UK, he joined the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an independent humanitarian organisation that supports displaced populations, as a conflict analyst. Developing research activities investigating conflict dynamics in South Sudan was one of his key tasks in this role, allowing him to directly apply the research skills and knowledge honed through his Scholarship.

'That's how I got my first job with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), it was because of having a strong research background. And having a PhD that focused on South Sudan in a position that required hiring research consultants to undertake research linked to the humanitarian context. They needed someone who was experienced in overseeing and managing a research project from start to completion.'

In his current role as Head of Advocacy, Media and Communications for the Norwegian Refugee Council covering the East Africa and Yemen region, Jeremy leads humanitarian advocacy work across ten countries: Yemen, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan, Sudan, and Ethiopia. This work takes place in-country through structures such as the Humanitarian Country Team, and NGO forums, and Jeremy has been instrumental in supporting this by providing evidence-based communication materials.

'I read for a PhD with the Commonwealth Scholarship, the skills of research design and implementation, as well as presentation of an argument, and the networking required to undertake PhD research are all valuable skills that I deploy often in my role as regional head of advocacy and analysis for an international humanitarian organisation.'

By providing written materials, presentations, and briefings on a range of issues, including evictions, and safe and dignified returns for displaced people, Jeremy has worked towards improving others' understanding of the complex contexts affecting these diverse communities. His materials have been delivered to important stakeholders such as the UK House of Commons International Development

Committee, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the US Department of State, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

'I feel the most significant impact of the Scholarship is through the skills that I have developed as much as the content of my PhD study. This has impacted the countries in which I work indirectly by ensuring that all our advocacy is built around strong analysis of the context and fully considers our own role as external agents operating in that context.'

Part of this work is focused on shifting policies to improve the conditions facing refugees and displaced people. For example, Jeremy has played a pivotal role in coordinating efforts to highlight violations of international humanitarian law in the war in Yemen and ensuring that refugees and internally displaced people have access to humanitarian support. He has also supported activities that contribute to the implementation of global initiatives such as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which lays out a vision for a more predictable and more comprehensive response to these crises, calling for greater support to refugees and the countries that host them.

In 2020, Yemen had **3,635,000** internally displaced people and **177,628** refugees, of whom **41%** were women, and **18%** were children. A total of **1,122,453** people received assistance from the NRC. This includes **34,772** who received support to access education programmes, **438,208** who received food supplies, **38,250** who benefited from the shelter programme, **13,357** who were beneficiaries of the camp management programme, **683,011** who gained access to water, sanitation and hygiene, and **201,762** who received information on counselling and legal assistance (NRC Report on Yemen, 2020).

## Terrorist Designations and Humanitarian Access in Yemen

Located in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is facing one of the world's most severe and long-running humanitarian crises, having experienced recurring droughts and a series of devastating famines. This has been worsened by ongoing internal political conflict, external regional interference, economic deterioration, and the total collapse of public services, leaving millions of people dependent on humanitarian aid for survival. Jeremy and his colleagues were actively involved in the humanitarian response from NRC, a central pillar of which aimed at reversing the Terrorist Designations of the Houthi rebel movement, Ansarallah in Yemen.

‘Ansarallah is effectively the government. If we [NRC] build a school and we transferred the school over to the Ministry of Education, if that ministry is now part of a terrorist entity, we would be in trouble for handing over something to a terrorist organisation.’

These revocations were intended to ensure that relevant American and Yemen government policies do not impede vital humanitarian access to refugees and displaced people in Yemen. Working collaboratively with the US Government, Jeremy provided written briefs, led private lobbying meetings, and mobilised public support through social media, strongly advocating for the urgent need for unimpeded humanitarian access in Yemen.

‘The designation of the Houthis, the Ansarallah, in Yemen, is an example where we felt as a community, we had really made a difference, because we had mobilised very quickly on this issue, and we had produced a strong evidence-base that we work in the country on humanitarian issues and condemned the proposed policies as they would worsen the humanitarian crisis. And we were able to make a very strong case.’

Jeremy added that the decision by the US to revoke the designation of Ansarallah in Yemen was one of the clearest and most significant humanitarian advocacy ‘wins’ for some time, as it increased the ability of aid to enter the country, improved livelihoods and boosted the economy.



## Humanitarian Interventions in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has a large population of internally displaced people due to conflicts, flooding, drought, and the socio-economic impact of Covid-19, among other causes. It is also surrounded by a region plagued with conflict and has become a hub for refugees from neighbouring countries including South Sudan, Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia. As of 2021, Ethiopia had approximately 2,105,387 displaced

people, and was also hosting 785,322 refugees. Mentioning Tigray as an example of one of the regions where the NRC was actively involved in providing humanitarian support, Jeremy highlighted both successes and challenges faced by him and colleagues in improving humanitarian access in this region.

‘We spent four months working really hard, late nights, long calls, writing reports, notes, triangulating information to improve humanitarian access into Tigray. It’s now improved, we were successful. Aid agencies are now able to reach most parts of Tigray.’

He added that the freedom of sharing information in a public space was a serious challenge in Ethiopia, where the government is particularly sensitive. On three occasions NRC staff have been evicted from the country by the authorities, and they were denied any access to Tigray for more than four months, even while hundreds of thousands of people were displaced and facing widespread hardship and human rights violations. This challenged the NRC to revise their communications strategy and streamline their messaging to focus on issues around improving humanitarian access to Tigray, while avoiding raising potentially controversial issues.

‘We [NRC] don’t have any capacity to do advocacy in the country team in Ethiopia. When the war started in Tigray, it meant that it was me doing it, and writing private briefing notes for donors, for the special envoys who had visited.’

Working collaboratively with other stakeholders, including the FCDO and the US State Department, to improve humanitarian access in Ethiopia, Jeremy also provided support to the European Union Special Envoy to ensure that they had access to adequate and evidence-based information on the humanitarian issues in Ethiopia. This input helped to inform their investigations and negotiations with government authorities to open humanitarian spaces to serve refugees and displaced people who were lacking food and water supplies, as well as health and education facilities.

NRC has provided support in Ethiopia since 2011. In 2020 alone, a total of **585,662** of refugees and displaced Ethiopians were reached. Of these beneficiaries, **46,976** obtained access to education facilities, **104,677** received information, counselling and legal assistance, **301,234** were provided access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, **144,662** benefitted from Covid-19 health related support, **67,394** have been sheltered, and **65,028** received food supplies (NRC Ethiopian Annual Report, 2020).

‘When we write a briefing note or a document, it is an evidence-based argument for why certain things need to happen to improve a situation. And the skills that I developed in undertaking a research PhD are hugely important in terms of being able to identify the conceptual spine of an argument.’

## Provision of Education in Emergencies

Displacement and forced migration create difficult contexts for the provision of education for children and youth. Displaced children may face limited access to education facilities, language barriers, and variation in curricula and education systems. Providing education facilities and ensuring that refugee children continue to access education in their host countries has been one of the key areas of focus for Jeremy and his colleagues and they have worked tirelessly to ensure that children’s rights to education and safety are upheld.

Part of this work involves encouraging governments in host countries to ensure that refugee children have the right to access education in local schools.

‘We work very hard to find ways of ensuring that children continue to receive education. And that can be having to develop our own curricula, working on the curriculum from the countries they were displaced from, and sourcing textbooks from that home country. Recently, we set up emergency classrooms very quickly for refugees that arrived from Tigray into Sudan.’

Where possible, suitable teachers are identified from within the communities of displaced people. These educational projects provide children the opportunity to continue with their schooling and for the youth to receive vocational training. School meals, sanitation facilities and clean water are also provided in schools meaning that these projects can offer displaced children a real lifeline and sense of stability. In 2020 alone, a total of 3,966 refugees benefited from the NRC education programme in Sudan.

## Protecting Refugees’ Right to Freedom of Movement

The NRC has also provided key humanitarian support in Kenya, despite experiencing some resistance from the Kenyan government. In 2016, the government threatened to close two of the country’s largest refugee camps, Dadaab and Kakuma, which were inhabited by roughly 400,000 people who required urgent shelter.

‘The skills developed through PhD research are integral to everything that I do, and I believe are reflected in all of NRC’s successful influence and humanitarian advocacy in the region. In Kenya, we advocate that people in Kakuma and Dadaab can leave if they wish to start a small business or if they have a business in the camp and they need to go outside to get supplies. They sometimes need complicated bureaucratic processes just to get the paper that allows them to go out and to come back.’

Jeremy highlighted several complex issues facing residents of these camps, and challenges for the organisations working there, including identifying and documenting their nationalities and human rights. To address and overcome these issues, a concerted evidence-based advocacy approach is used by the NRC. In effectively deploying this approach, Jeremy often draws from the skills and knowledge sharpened during his Commonwealth Scholarship.

‘We often work on addressing freedom of movement rights. We also work to improve access to all the documentation, birth certificates, death certificates, and marriage certificates. A lot of them [refugees] when they flee, they flee with nothing, and they find themselves in a place that’s foreign and then they are unable to access any service.’



In 2020, a total of **250,176** refugees and displaced people in Kenya received assistance from the NRC. Of these, **66,383** received information, counselling, and legal assistance and, through this, were able to access civil documentation such as birth, marriage, and death certificates. (NRC Facts and Figures Report, 2020)

## Navigating the Challenge of Covid-19

The humanitarian work conducted by the NRC relies heavily on funds from major donors, including the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the World Food Programme (WFP), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was limited flexibility on the donor funds available to the NRC, making it difficult to incorporate the adjustments to humanitarian activities required to meet the additional challenges posed by the pandemic. Jeremy shared his experiences of the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the humanitarian work being conducted by the NRC, and the mitigation measures implemented to ensure that humanitarian support could be sustained for refugees and displaced people.

In Tanzania, Jeremy also worked closely with local authorities to ensure that a system was created whereby refugees could gain access to birth certificates. Advocacy efforts from the NRC in Tanzania led to the development of government-approved Standard Operating Procedures for birth registrations, and 13,537 refugee children in Nduta refugee camp were registered for the first time.

## Engaging Stakeholders to Stop Violation of Human Rights

The humanitarian work conducted by Jeremy and his colleagues has been supported by a variety of key stakeholders, as previously mentioned. These have been pivotal points of contact particularly when the NRC is faced with resistance from governments in host countries or pushback against the humanitarian responses offered by the NRC. This support is vital in allowing them to continue serving displaced and vulnerable groups and preventing them from being exposed to various forms of exploitation, violation of their basic human rights and disruption of their livelihoods. These stakeholders have intervened and negotiated with the governments concerned, often resulting in a better reception of evidence-based messaging from the NRC regarding human rights violations or displacement.

Other key stakeholders include organisations such as Human Rights Watch and journalists, who receive, and enact activities based on humanitarian background briefings provided by Jeremy and colleagues.

**'We've done briefings for the State Department, the FCDO in the UK. We've done briefings for member states in Geneva. These tend to be private meetings where we talk about what our teams are experiencing and what needs to be done to assist people, whether that's internally displaced people or refugees. An important part of what I do is networking to establish joint initiatives.'**

Understanding the local contexts in which the NRC operates is one of the key areas that contribute to the success of their humanitarian advocacy work and other interventions. Working closely with stakeholders, they have been able to issue highly impactful joint statements, where all the organisations agree on the most effective language and framing for a statement to support humanitarian causes.

**'We spent a long time advocating with the donors to give us more flexible funding to be able to divert some of the donor funds. For example, if we have implemented education programmes and then the government insists that all the schools must close, we wouldn't be able to spend that money in the way that we were going to spend it.'**

The pandemic forced the NRC to negotiate with their donors to allow for more flexible funding arrangements to accommodate and respond to the unforeseeable impacts of Covid-19 on humanitarian activities. While they received a mixed response to these requests, many donors were willing to offer some limited flexibility in funding. As a result, Jeremy and his colleagues were able to introduce some innovative projects, including classrooms over the radio, and securing internet access to support the rolling out of online classes. These interventions allowed refugee children to continue their education during the pandemic.

Apart from funding constraints from donors, the NRC were also hindered by travel restrictions during the pandemic which further limited their access to areas where urgent humanitarian assistance was required.

**'The pandemic forced us to re-evaluate the way in which we work, to ensure that we, as an organisation were able to continue to do what we do [offer humanitarian assistance]. We started off asking for permissions to travel. In many countries we were not listed as essential services, and so we had to advocate and lobby to be included in the essential services lists so that our teams could continue to distribute food and so on.'**

The advocacy for humanitarian exemptions to travel restrictions and to gain access to locations such as refugee camps was successful. This was also made possible by the determination of relevant authorities to reduce the risks of exacerbating existing humanitarian crises.

'It has been an exceptionally rewarding and interesting experience, and impactful for the refugees and displaced people that my organisation has worked with.'

In 2020 alone, the humanitarian support provided by the Norwegian Refugee Council reached about **4 million** people in East Africa and Yemen. Support provided included the provision of food, infrastructure for shelter, water and sanitation, and access to health and education facilities.

Jeremy is justifiably proud of the humanitarian work he has contributed to in East Africa and Yemen, which has offered a lifeline of support and improved the livelihoods of millions of refugees and displaced people. He is determined to continue working to protect human rights and improve the lives of some of the worlds' most vulnerable communities.

#### More about Dr Jeremy Taylor's work

<https://www.nrc.no/resources/briefing-notes/an-unnecessary-burden-forced-evictions-and-covid-19/>

<https://www.nrc.no/resources/briefing-notes/protecting-populations-preserving-humanitarian-space/>

<https://www.nrc.no/resources/position-papers/not-going-hungry-during-covid-19/>

<https://www.nrc.no/resources/position-papers/considering-the-needs-of-tomorrow-alongside-those-of-today-cash--covid-19/>

#### Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK

Woburn House

20-24 Tavistock Square , London WC1H 9HF

Email: [evaluation@cscuk.org.uk](mailto:evaluation@cscuk.org.uk)

Website: [cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk](https://cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk)

