

Interview – Reva Dhingra

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUL 6 2023

This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Reva Dhingra is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution, affiliated with the Center for Middle East Policy. She has a PhD. in Government from Harvard University. She researches and writes on the politics and effects of refugee responses and humanitarian aid, refugee access to social services in the Middle East, and Western resettlement and asylum policies. Her other work focuses on migrant and refugee rights in the United States and the fiscal and behavioral impacts of government policies towards migrants and refugees. Her policy analysis and peer-reviewed research has been published with outlets including the Washington Post, Lawfare, Brookings, the Journal of Refugee Studies, and Political Behavior. She previously worked with the International Rescue Committee's Syria Response Team from 2015-2017.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I started studying Arabic in fall 2010, only a few months before the revolution began in Tunisia and uprisings spread across the region. In early 2013, I traveled to Jordan for the first time, where I witnessed communities open their doors to refugees fleeing Syria and the challenges newly displaced Syrians were facing in terms of housing and access to the labor market. My undergraduate advisor Dr. Sa'ed Atshan was particularly influential in my decision to focus on the economic and political effects of refugees and international aid. I also spent three years working directly in the Syrian humanitarian response after college, first in Jordan and then for the International Rescue Committee, which directly shaped my research focus. Over twelve years since the Syrian civil war began, my research is still motivated by the goal of improving international humanitarian aid approaches and host government policies towards refugees.

Scholars I read and interacted with during my early years of graduate school were formative in helping me develop my research agenda. I read political scientist Karen Jacobsen's work early on, where she argues that refugees can be resources for neglected border communities. She highlights the economic contributions of refugees as well as their ability to help border communities attract resources in developing states. Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity* on the history of the humanitarian system was very influential in my analysis of humanitarian aid organizations as both altruistic and materially driven actors. My dissertation advisor Melani Cammett's work on service delivery in fragile, clientelist states, her work on non-state actors, and her insightful advice over the years has shaped how I look at the interaction between international involvement and local service provision during refugee responses.

Your book project, *A Shock to the System? Refugee Crises and Local Government in Developing States*, specifically examines the intersection between international involvement and refugee communities in Jordan and how this influences local government's role and abilities. What are your findings and how might this research have implications in other countries?

In my book project, I examine the effects of refugees and international involvement on local service provision in

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refugee-hosting communities in Jordan, where I've spent almost a decade researching and working on refugee and host community access to services and the political economy of the Syrian refugee presence. I argue and find that international aid can mitigate the service effects of additional populations on local public service provision. While there may be short term impacts, I find using quantitative data that service delivery by municipalities recovered five years after the arrival of refugees due to international and central state support. However, I also find that existing distributive relationships between a local elected official and the central state shape what aid and service provision look like at the local level. Specifically, I show using interviews and qualitative work that mayors with already-strong ties to the central state will see fewer short term negative effects of the additional population on service delivery, and attempt to capitalize politically and personally on additional resources offered by international actors. The rise of entrepreneurial mayors with independent political coalitions has implications for center-local relations: but in an authoritarian context such as Jordan, has led to a backlash from the central state.

In shaping our understanding of refugee-hosting developing states more broadly, my research argues for moving beyond a burden or resource framework in understanding the effects of refugee presences. I underscore the need for sufficient international aid for developing state localities, particularly given the stark country-level and regional disparities in funding for refugee responses—such as between the Ukraine response and the Venezuelan response. Localities already struggling with service delivery can welcome refugees with sufficient support. Individuals I interviewed in Jordan described deep empathy for Syrians displaced from their homes and families. But I also show how aid can be coopted by international, national, and local actors—and the importance of partnering with context-aware local civil society organizations in aid implementation.

There is international discussion about the benefits and flaws of the international aid system. What are your thoughts on this discussion? Does the international aid system require an overhaul?

Discussions on overhauling the international aid system have been going on for decades, though obviously what that overhaul means has shifted over time. There are also different but related challenges facing the aid system in disaster and humanitarian response compared to in the development sector that takes a longer-term approach. In humanitarian responses, which is where I have focused most of my research, it's clear that something isn't working—and it's not just because the needs outstrip the funding available (though that is a huge reason as well).

There are three recent pushes in humanitarian aid reform that I focus on: 1) shifting the funding to more medium and long-term approaches; 2) "localization" early on in humanitarian response; and 3) enhancing coordination mechanisms. First, there has been plenty of work on the humanitarian-development nexus and the need to adopt more long-term programming in refugee response situations given the fact that most refugees will be displaced for longer than five years. This means that grants need to be for longer periods and that organizations should be working with and within host state delivery systems from the outset. The second area is localization, which is a policy priority for USAID and other donors—it means shifting power and funding to local civil society and government partners rather than internationally led responses. In a humanitarian context, we've seen time and time again that the first responders to disasters—such as the February 6 Turkey-Syria earthquakes—or to welcoming refugees are local communities and elected officials. International support needs to complement and center the efforts of local actors rather than displace them. There's been a lot of progress on this recently but there is still a long way to go. Finally, I've researched ways to improve coordination during refugee and other humanitarian responses, including in a paper for the Journal of Refugee Studies. What we see is intensifying effort to monitor refugee and host community access to aid—such as biometrics to ensure the same individual isn't receiving duplicate support from different organizations. But there's less progress on adopting data tools to prevent duplicated service provision by aid organizations themselves, or crowding in specific geographic areas. There have been important steps forward in coordination in recent years, and changes such as using geospatial tools or reviewing the cluster response will ultimately benefit refugees and host community members in a scarce funding environment.

In a recent piece you argued that U.S. policymakers could learn from the EU approach to the refugee situation in Libya. Which lessons can be learned? What are the flaws to the EU's approach?

The EU and its member countries have sought to restrict irregular migration following a rapid uptick in asylum-seeker

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and migrant arrivals over land and sea routes in 2014 and 2015. A key way they've done this is through cooperative agreements and aid to Turkey and Libya—two primary transit countries for individuals seeking to reach Europe—along with other North African countries. In the article I argue that a focus on border enforcement and keeping people out has led Europe to overlook atrocities committed by the Libyan state and hybrid groups against migrants and asylum-seekers. It also has opened up the EU to authoritarian blackmail by Libya, Turkey, and now Tunisia. I argue that the US should avoid such an approach to migration management in the Americas given these lessons. Regional migration management—partnering with refugee and migrant receiving and transit countries—is key, but it can't come at the expense of human rights.

How has the European approach to those displaced by the war in Ukraine differed to the European approach to the 2015-2016 crisis?

The response in 2015-2016 varied dramatically country-by-country. You saw Hungary for example adopting an extremely hard line against refugees and asylum-seekers and engaging in pushbacks, while Germany under Angela Merkel was adopting much more friendly rhetoric towards refugees initially in response to the heartbreaking images of bodies of refugees washing up from the Mediterranean Sea. But the unifying factor in 2015-2016 was that the initial welcome soured pretty quickly. The EU shifted towards a model of increased border enforcement and deals with refugee-hosting and refugee-transit countries such as Turkey and Libya. The consequence of this has been increased refugee and migrant rights violations in third countries and the emergence of other deadly sea and land routes such as from Tunisia.

Over a year since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there aren't really the same signs that Europe is growing weary of Ukrainian refugees. There have been key policies implemented by the EU to facilitate refugees finding housing and employment, including a Temporary Protection Directive giving them immediate legal status. There are certainly differences in the demographics and language of refugees arriving from Ukraine and non-Ukrainian refugees from Syria and other countries who were coming in 2015-2016 and continue to arrive, and Ukrainians also have family networks in Europe. But a lot of the difference has also been around the legal and logistical support accorded to different refugee populations. The Ukrainian response can and should be a model for how Europe treats other asylum-seekers.

What are you currently working on?

In terms of academic work, I'm currently focusing on my book project and working to integrate lessons from other regional contexts. I have ongoing coauthored projects that I'm working on including research on Iraq and in Kenya, but definitely focusing on the book project for the foreseeable future.

In my policy work, I had a recent piece out on the need for international policy shifts in supporting Syrian refugees, particularly in light of the Assad government's normalizing relations with neighboring states. I am writing up some of my findings from my book project and dissertation as a report for the Brookings Institution. It asks how lessons learned from the Syrian humanitarian response in Jordan and other countries can shape aid programming both in the future of the Syria response and in response to more recent displacement situations. I have other events and projects underway including one with Sophie Roehse on local responses to Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe and a separate project arguing for more purposeful involvement of local elected officials in migration policy, with a focus on lessons from the Middle East and Americas.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

For scholars still in graduate school, I would recommend doing as much fieldwork as possible early on in a research project. While it's often harder to get funding for theory-generating compared to theory-testing fieldwork, my trips to Jordan and Lebanon in the first years of grad school were incredibly generative experiences for me. This means submitting a proposal with an idea very early on and being completely open to that changing.

The second recommendation I'd have is to build and maintain strong ties with the policy and practice worlds, and

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make sure you are getting your research out in either private or public fora where it can have an impact. For me, research is about both knowledge production and working to improve policies as part of accountability to the communities whose knowledge I've drawn on. Policymakers sometimes think that there hasn't been work done on a research question, when often the issue is that there is work that has been done that isn't being read or isn't reaching open-access outlets. There are initiatives like Bridging the Gap that help scholars translate their academic research to policy venues.