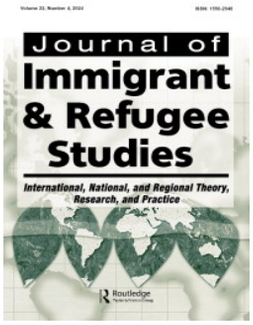

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Exploring Factors Related to the Development and Implementation of a Local Intervention Program for Syrian Refugee Children

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ABSTRACT

Many interventions have been developed to improve educational and developmental outcomes in Syrian refugee children. Here, we focus on one such intervention, We Love Reading, a community-led, shared book-reading program that was developed in Jordan by a Jordanian-run NGO. We conducted a grounded theory analysis of 21 semi-structured interviews with individuals who developed We Love Reading and/or were involved in its implementation. Participants indicated that attaining a balance between two main factors helped with the long-term maintenance and sustainability of the program: the informality and flexibility of the program on the one hand and creating the necessary motivation and commitment in volunteers on the other. Future programs that wish to attain long-term sustainability may benefit from creating a more engaging and incentivizing structure of motivation for their volunteers.

KEYWORDS

Program development; implementation; Syrian refugee children; shared book reading; we love reading; cultural context

Introduction

Over 1% of the world's population has been forcibly displaced as a result of humanitarian crises (UNHCR, 2021). One such humanitarian crisis is the Syrian refugee crisis, which has caused the largest movement of a population since World War II (UNHCR, 2017). There have been approximately 6.7 million Syrians forcibly displaced since 2011, a large majority of whom live in neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2021). Jordan, for example, is currently hosting 674,268 Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2021), who experience high rates of poverty (85% living below the poverty line; UNICEF, 2018), have limited resources for support, and experience stress as a result of separation from families and communities. They often live in camp settings or overcrowded houses and depend on financial support from non-governmental bodies (Gammouh et al., 2015). Complex registration processes and employment restrictions further limit their access to education, healthcare services, and job opportu4nities (Wells et al., 2016).

Intervention programs for Syrian refugee children

Such humanitarian crises adversely impact children's developmental trajectories (Mcewen & Mcewen, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007), and their mental

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health (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; Yayan et al., 2020), limiting their access to support and a nurturing environment from their families (Murphy et al., 2017). Childhood educational programs, however, may help lessen the negative impact of adversity (Bradley & Corwyn, 2005; Britto et al., 2017; Engle et al., 2011), introducing many benefits such as offering a supportive learning environment and enhancing language development, motivation and self-regulation (Gottfried, 2013). Intervention programs can also further promote the existing protective effects of family, peer, and community support, through school and social surroundings (Barrio, 2000; Tolan et al., 2002). These programs can enhance communication, and educational and employment skills for children and adolescents, improve relationships with family members, and help their integration into society (Soltan et al., 2020).

In a qualitative study exploring Syrian refugees' experiences of displacement, many indicated that reaching out to social contacts, good family cohesion and the well-being of the family were useful coping strategies (Zbidat et al., 2020). In another qualitative study, Syrian refugees in Jordan similarly described the effect of the community in normalizing their struggles (i.e., a sense of shared suffering because most people have experienced loss; Wells et al., 2016). Intervention programs may emphasize a more ecological model, highlighting the effects of socio-cultural adjustment, family and peer relations, school inclusion, society and culture (Drozdek, 2015; Vostanis, 2016). Some successful intervention programs can also provide new roles, identities, existential meaning, and social bonds (Silove, 2013).

Cultural context in program development and implementation

Importantly, these programs are best understood and cultivated through an appropriate cultural lens. That is, the implementation of such programs in low-and-middle income countries requires cultural compatibility and a contextualized framework that adequately engages community leaders and local partners (Ponguta et al., 2019; Sangraula et al., 2021). In other words, the cultural context remains crucial for successful intervention implementation (Sangraula et al., 2021). By contrast, simply translating interventions across cultures without incorporating changes or adaptations might reduce the effectiveness of the intervention (Chowdhary et al., 2014). For example, implementing mental health interventions for refugee children in high-income countries are often made less impactful by complex cultural differences (Fazel & Betancourt, 2018).

Because of their cultural background, Syrian refugees may have a strong reliance on their social relationships, with community-based group programs particularly suitable (Bunn et al., 2021; Murakami & Chen, 2019). In essence, the families, children, and volunteers in the community may more readily accept a program if it fits with their traditions and beliefs (Weine, 2011). A program rooted fully in the local context may evade problems of trust between families and the organization as well as any language issues. Another benefit for local programs that build on and harness the strengths of the community includes creating a feeling of mutual ownership of the program and its outcomes (Weine, 2011). Furthermore, programs that are developed locally and organically, when compared to more controlled programs that evolve through stages of a prescribed model (Rounsaville et al., 2001), may react more flexibly to evolving changes, have more open channels of feedback, and incorporate lessons learned during the process (Weine, 2011). The effective implementation of a local program can be further expected when participants are able to comprehend the intervention and when developers avoid overly professional and technical language (Weine, 2011).

Present work

The present work explores the relevant factors in the development and implementation of a community-led, shared book-reading program in a humanitarian crisis setting. Community-led, shared book-reading interventions have been shown to improve early childhood development

and reduce inequity. There is also evidence that shared book-reading programs improve children's language and literacy and increase caregivers' feelings of competence and sensitivity (Dowdall et al., 2020). There is limited research on the development and implementation of these programs particularly in low-income countries and in response to the educational challenges that Syrian refugee children in Jordan face.

We Love Reading (WLR) is a community-led shared book-reading intervention program derived from the local Jordanian context. The program involves mothers and members of the community reading stories to children. It was developed by a local agent in the community and delivered by Taghyeer Foundation, a Jordanian NGO, in response to needs identified by the local community. It involves training local volunteers to read stories to children in their native language (ages 4–12) at least once a week. WLR encourages volunteers to read for a period of at least 2 months. WLR involves people volunteering for, being trained in, and then delivering shared book-reading sessions. Typically, each person gathers groups of six to eight children at least once per week to read books to them. The program aims to improve the children's educational trajectory and love of reading. The present study examined the factors that enhanced its effectiveness, the challenges and barriers to its effectiveness and if or how the challenges were overcome. An understanding of the process by which the various factors interact to impact program effectiveness and sustainability is also presented. Through using WLR as a case example, the study aims to outline the relevant factors and considerations in the development and implementation of a local intervention program.

Method

Procedure and participants

Twenty-one one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online with the senior team who developed WLR and with adults who delivered and implemented WLR. Staff were informed of the study and asked whether they would be willing take part during paid working hours by their line manager. A purposive sampling method was employed in which participants deemed suitable to provide insights on the phenomenon of interest were targeted (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A list of those willing to take part was shared with the first author, who contacted potential participants directly and conducted all the interviews. The study received ethical approval. Data collection was conducted on April, 2021 to June, 2021.

All participants volunteered (non-remunerated) and indicated consent prior to participation. The inclusion criteria were participants who were involved in developing and helping to develop WLR *or* implementing/delivering the WLR sessions, and were aged 18 and above. All interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and subsequently transcribed and translated to English. All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer. We stopped conducting interviews when data saturation was achieved. That is, when responses to questions yielded no new information and no new codes were noted. Of the 21 participants who took part, 18 were women and three were men. Participants were of Jordanian, Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian nationalities. Two individuals were unable to take part in the study. Interviews lasted an average of approximately 42 min (SD = 23.8).

Interviews

Two separate semi-structured interview guides were used: one for participants who developed WLR (OSF) and one for participants who implemented WLR (OSF) For the purposes of clarity, we refer to participants who developed the program as "WLR staff members" and for participants who implemented it as "WLR volunteers" The questions for participants developing WLR revolved around how the idea for WLR was developed and formed, the role of the community, challenges faced when developing WLR, challenges faced when implementing the training, and potential

improvements and barriers to effectiveness. We further inquired on community engagement with the program as well as the responses of parents and children to the training and program. The questions for participants implementing the program focused on their experience of implementing WLR as well as their experience of receiving the training and adapting the program. They were asked about parent and child responses to their reading sessions, and the perceived impact of WLR on the volunteers themselves, the children who took part in the sessions, and the community at large.

Analysis

Because the study aims to understand the process of developing and implementing an intervention program in a humanitarian crisis context, a grounded theory methodology was chosen. The purpose of this grounded theory analysis is to generate or discover a theory rooted in the experiences and perceptions of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is a systematic method of identifying emergent themes from the data, in an inductive or bottom-up way, through reviewing and coding the collected data and constructing theories based on the data (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory analysis was applied using open coding (the process of sweeping through the data), axial coding (the process of sorting the codes into groups) and selective coding (the process of developing minor and major categories) and lastly, through constructing a theoretical framework (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) by the first author. The data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, allowing for the emerging theory to inform the data collection. During data collection and analysis, memos and field notes were kept by the first author. Through constant comparative analysis, participants' responses were compared and connected to others as codes and categories emerged (Birks & Mills, 2015). That is, emerging codes were constantly compared with previous codes developed in other excerpts of the same interview or those developed in other interview excerpts. Through discussions and feedback with research team members on the process of the evolving theory and interpretation of the data, trustworthiness and credibility of the study was enhanced (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Regular meetings between RB and KH were conducted during data collection and analysis to promote critical reflection and discussion of emergent findings (Charmaz, 2014; Padgett, 2016).

Positionality

The study was approached from the position that all research is influenced by those who conduct it (Charmaz, 2014). In the case of this study, the first author who conducted the interviews, was born and raised in Lebanon and is familiar with the cultural context of the Levant and with the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. The first author has some experience of working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon. However, it is important to acknowledge the social position of the first author who was an affiliate and representative of a western institution, which may have impacted the process. Being approached by a researcher affiliated with a different culture or background may have impacted the rapport between the researcher and participant. Because of the influence of different factors such as social positions and personal backgrounds, the authors ensured that the study was grounded in the lived experiences, context and perspectives of the participants, and that the analysis and theory matched the data from the interviews.

Results

Participants described that the core overarching process in developing and implementing the intervention program was the attainment of balance between two factors of the program: the informality and flexibility of the program on the one hand and creating the necessary motivation

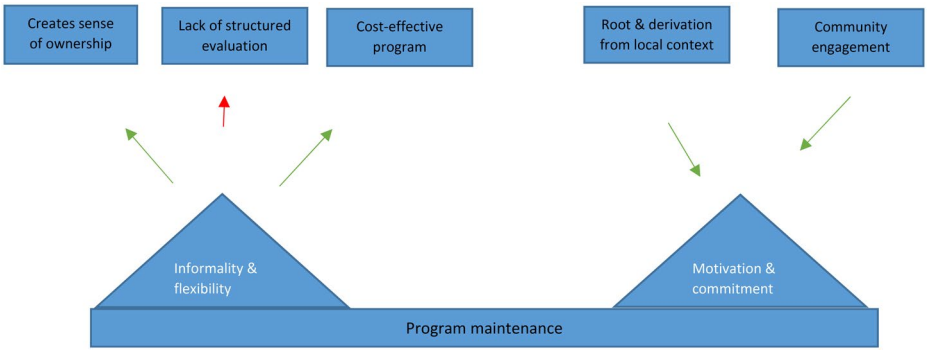

Figure 1. The balance between two relevant factors in order to achieve long-term program maintenance.

and commitment in volunteers on the other hand. Attaining a balance between the two factors was thought to help with the long-term maintenance and sustainability of the program. Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation of the interrelationship or interaction between the program's informality and flexibility versus the motivation and commitment of the program's volunteers. The figure illustrates how the two main factors (1) "flexibility and informality of program" and (2) "maintaining volunteer motivation and commitment" each impact the outcome of program maintenance and effectiveness.

We also present how the underlying components of these two factors contribute to or present a barrier to the effectiveness of the program. In particular, the informality and flexibility of the program created positive consequences including *feelings of ownership in beneficiaries* and *cost-effectiveness,* both of which increased *motivation and commitment in volunteers* and facilitated program maintenance and sustainability. It also created a negative consequence which decreased motivation and commitment in volunteers and impeded program maintenance and sustainability, namely a *lack of structured framework for volunteers.* On the other hand, factors which increased motivation and commitment in volunteers and in turn enhanced program maintenance and sustainability included visible *community engagement and impact* and *root and derivation of the program from a local context*. We elaborate on the process and the associated factors in further detail below.

Informality and flexibility of program

The concept of the informality and flexibility of the program refers to a lack of fixed structure or schedule for volunteers conducting the reading sessions as well as a lack of fixed and systematic structure for evaluation, measurements, and assessments. Flexibility of the program also referred to having an adaptable idea at the core of the program, albeit with a minimal set of requirements that needed to be met. For many participants, this flexibility allowed the program to spread and adapt to new and diverse settings more easily. Participants said that the program's flexibility allowed for it to be applied and adopted by a larger number of people and contributed to making the program more reproducible, which was seen as a crucial reason behind its success and longevity.

> The program was reduced to its empirical formula: read aloud, in your native tongue, stories from your culture, in a public space, on a regular basis - you can define everything else. And this simplicity, based on trust and universal values, gives you the flexibility to do whatever you want. How was a program created that both caters for the local culture yet is also scalable? By identifying this simple framework that is shared universally - you can do whatever you want to fill the gaps the way you like. (*Member of WLR staff, Female*)

We discuss the several consequences of the concept of "informality and flexibility" of the program and detail the process by which each of the consequences of "informality and flexibility"

either positively or negatively affected program effectiveness and maintenance, through impacting volunteer motivation and commitment.

Creating a sense of ownership in volunteers

Participants said that a positive consequence of the "informality and flexibility" of the program is the feeling of ownership and leadership created in volunteers delivering the reading sessions. Although guidance, training, and support were provided to the volunteers, participants believed that the sustainability of the program was enhanced if volunteers were autonomous and had the freedom to manage their contributions at their own pace. Volunteers were freely able to set the time, location, and frequency of the reading sessions. Other details such as the choice of book and number of books to be read per session were decided by the volunteer.

> (after volunteers are given a bag of children's books) no one then asks them when, how or where. Nothing at all. So she doesn't feel that anyone is watching her. Because as soon as you feel that someone is watching over you, you don't want to do it. It's a thin line, the feeling of agency, that I really am the owner. As soon as you ask her when, you've destroyed the ownership. It's a delicate balance. Imagine how great this is – we call this the freedom sauce, that's why they keep reading (to children) *(Member of staff, female)*

Participants believed that creating a sense of freedom and agency in volunteers served to increase their motivation and commitment to the project, while also having a positive personal impact on the volunteers themselves (e.g., feeling more capable).

> The foreign programs that come in give the volunteers money and say do this or do that - there is no agency. There's no "I control my future" or "I am relevant, I don't need help." How do you remove that? WLR did that. Each volunteer thought "okay I can do that," because we leave the decision to her. *(Member of staff, female)*

Importantly, both factors of creating a sense of ownership in the volunteers and the resulting positive impact on the volunteers help increase volunteer motivation and commitment to the program. The maintenance and sustainability of the program relies extensively on internally-driven volunteers who adopt and persevere with the program. As such, participants believed that creating a sense of ownership led to a positive impact on volunteers, which in turn increased their motivation and commitment to the program. This then helped ensure greater program effectiveness and maintenance. A WLR volunteer mentioned that "The ownership and leadership that this initiative implants in the person makes the person persevere and do it at their own comfort."

Cost-effectivity

Participants believe that the program was simple and adaptable to different settings. Because of the program's informality and adaptability, additional costs for employees and trainees aimed to be minimal when applied to new settings. Participants claimed that the program aimed to keep costs the same when recruiting new volunteers and conducting new trainings. Participants declare that there are no major additional costs associated with the program expanding and spreading which ultimately allowed for a bigger number of volunteers to apply to the program. In the long run, this added to the sustainability and maintenance of the program. Participants said that the training of volunteers is similarly flexible and straightforward, which ensures the program can be learned by a larger number of people without any strict restrictions or criteria on who is able to volunteer. A female member of the WLR staff mentioned that "This program only costs training and some books, in the beginning, and you don't need to fund it sustainably later on. That's it, you do it once. And it stays." Another member of the WLR staff also mentioned that "With regards to funding, we reduced the empirical formula, we reduced it to how many employees we need at least to keep the online training running and the basics running, that's all."

In many cases, participants stated that the program attempts to use minimal resources and costs, which can give volunteers who implement the program more freedom as they are not restricted by a limited timeframe. Participants believe volunteers are then able to contribute without the restrictions of funding, further allowing the program's expansion. Participants believed that these factors positively impacted volunteers' commitment and motivation to the program, in turn ensuring its maintenance.

> … and till now even 4 years later, those who were trained still read in that camp. When they met them, and they asked why are you still reading when no one is paying you? And everyone is gone. They said we don't read for you, we read for our children, our neighbourhood. *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

Less reliance on funds also translates to less reliance on external funding sources and organizations. It was often expressed that funding from external or western bodies may challenge or attempt to modify the core idea, without taking into account the experiences and input of the local community. Additionally, a lesser need for funding can allow the program to evolve gradually, without the pressure of deadlines and urgent deliverables imposed by funding bodies. Participants expressed that the program should evolve at a more natural or organic pace, addressing problems as they arise in the immediate local context. Participants believed that this gradual evolution of the program positively impacted the program's effectiveness and maintenance.

> So another thing is not to fall into – this donor wants this and the other donor wants that … The core program never changes at all. And because it was holistically developed, organically, it can cater to anything from the community while staying true to what it is. *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

Although participants suggest that the program utilizes low resources, notably, however, it remains crucial to secure funds for additional program activities. For example, team members of the program reported that additional funds can be used for several areas: creating more diverse selection of books or a bigger number of books to keep children and volunteers engaged, conduct more trainings to further expand the program, enhance the program's social media presence, employ more staff to conduct follow ups on volunteers and conduct more awareness sessions to enhance program expansion.

Lack of structured framework for evaluation and monitoring

The program lacks a clear and structured framework for evaluating goals and tracking volunteer outcomes and accomplishments. However, participants indicated that this was intentional. Specifically, not imposing a systematic structure to evaluate volunteer outcomes does not burden volunteers with maintaining data and record-keeping.

> So during the three years I tried to get cards and document all the names of the kids who attended. Then I gave it up because it's not practical … So we removed that documentation … I don't care to count how many kids came in … what is it I care to measure? Do I care about making the readers do a checklist every time or that they continue reading for 2 years? Which is better? *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

As part of the program, however, there is no long-term assessment or measurement in place to ensure that goals are being met. Participants argue that this gives volunteers a stronger feeling of freedom and independence when applying the program. Additionally, participants also argue that this saves the volunteers time and energy related to performing administrative work. However, with a lack of a structured framework for evaluation, it is difficult to produce consistent and meaningful data for the program for a long-term basis. This, in turn, may make it more challenging to demonstrate long-term program effectiveness or progress to obtain funds from various funding bodies and ensure the sustainability of the program. While in principle, a structure of evaluation or measurement is not regularly incorporated into the program, participants noted that measurement is initiated when needed for certain projects or funding bodies.

> What do you measure? Many people said have a list – UNICEF said when we took the grant from them. They said we need measurements, we need reports, the names of the kids, their ages. I said wait a bit… the readers stay long after the project, actually they begin delivering after the project, the project is just about training… As soon as I start asking volunteers for data, they will stop reading. So what would you like? Would you want data without deliverables? Or do you want deliverables? *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

Additionally, having no structure for evaluating the outcomes and volunteer progress means there is not a structured system of motivation for volunteers. Many participants noted that conducting more frequent follow ups with the volunteers and a program of (non-monetary) incentivizing can further solidify volunteer motivation and commitment to the program.

> The volunteers need to be communicating more with the program. Because we had big numbers of volunteers and the employees are few, the volunteers needed more follow ups, more encouragement. A program of motivation. Not monetary motivation, I am not for having monetary motivation, but people sometimes need a phone call from the program to say well done, your achievements are great… So I think that is the basic thing, that could've been worked on if there was funding. The results would've been better and better, and volunteers would continue for longer. *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

Importantly, participants noted that giving volunteers the freedom to make their own choices and decisions is an important part of the program. They also recognized, however, that when participants function completely at their own convenience they may lose interest or passion long term. Participants expressed that volunteers have a need to hear positive reinforcement and feedback from the members of the organization who track their achievements and give them motivation to continue when needed. Participants acknowledged that finding the right amount of contact with the volunteers while maintaining the flexibility that is crucial to the program success is challenge.

Motivation and commitment in volunteers

Participants said that volunteers who were motivated by a sense of duty to their community maintained their involvement with the program. Maintaining their commitment and motivation to the program was essential to its success. However, many participants noted challenges in finding internally-motivated and driven volunteers who are committed to the program. A member of the WLR staff mentioned said "That was one of the main challenges, how to keep volunteers motivated. That is a very big and important challenge." Similarly, another participant mentioned that:

> If you want to do something you are doing it for your community. If you don't want to do it, you are free. So that alone filters people out, whoever has a sense of responsibility (towards the community) will continue, and those who don't, won't continue. *(WLR volunteer, female)*

A related challenge reported by the program team was tackling the distorted notion of voluntary work in Jordan, which often times offered volunteers a monetary reward in exchange for their volunteering. By contrast, volunteers in WLR were not recruited *via* monetary gain rather, participants believed they were joining because of a sense of commitment to their community.

> I feel if something has a material incentive the person would lose the passion towards it. Because if the material incentive is gone, they would stop… On the contrary, I feel that the strength of the program or the power of it, is that it continues without incentives. *(WLR volunteer, female)*

Participants noted that additional ways to enhance volunteer motivation included having one influential volunteer in a neighborhood as a role model. Another included assigning full recognition to the volunteers themselves for the achievements rather than the organizational body. For example, when volunteers successfully implement the reading sessions in their respective communities, they are given full credit for their achievements.

> When having a single volunteer in a neighbourhood, this works as a motivation for the rest to take the training. They think: ah I want to become like her, she is reading to children, has books, where did she get them from? *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

We discuss below factors which were essential in enhancing volunteer motivation and commitment to the program, and that positively affected program effectiveness and maintenance.

Root and derivation from local context

Many participants commented that their commitment and belief in the program was strengthened by knowing of the program's origins and roots in their local context and community. Volunteers expressed that it was easier for them to trust the motives and intentions behind the program as a result. The WLR staff who trained the volunteers commented that volunteers often needed reassurance that the program was not Western-led. Participants reported that foreign-led programs may have alternative aims or attempt to impose their own agenda or values on the local community. It was frequently expressed that people outside of the community cannot fully understand the problems of that community. A program that is locally developed and led by members of the community was perceived as more in line with volunteers' values, traditions and beliefs. Additionally, participants reported that the program feels more authentic as it was created and sustained fully by locals. This helped cement their commitment to the program and make them feel more personally invested in the program.

> But here comes the point that it is from the community itself – not some outsider or foreigner who comes in with some idea … she starts in her own neighbourhood, she doesn't say this is coming from WLR. She herself comes in and says I want to read to the children, so it is not threatening neither to the culture nor to the community, or to the reader. It is so natural. So everyone welcomes it and everyone supports it. *(WLR volunteer, female)*

Furthermore, the program developed their own material, which involved children's books and training material similarly derived from the local context. While the subject matter of the children's books may differ, depending on funding bodies, participants said that it remained rooted in the culture and values of the local context. Participants tried to ensure that it was in line with the vision and agenda of the program. Participants explained that writers and illustrators were recruited from the local context and their stories embodied a local understanding of the values. Furthermore, participants noted the training was conducted and developed by local community members, who designed it to reflect feedback from the community. The training material featured success stories of previous volunteers from the community and the specific challenges they faced within their community. This gave the conception that the program was tried and tested and tailored for this community. The training similarly respects local customs and allowed for participants to express culture-specific challenges that were discussed and understood by local agents of the same community. Through creating a local program that was better able to attract and engage volunteers from the community, the program's effectiveness and impact was better sustained and maintained.

> The volunteers can quit whenever they want. And when you have the freedom to quit, you don't quit. If you want to do something you are doing it for your community. If you don't want to do it, you are free. I want them to do it because they have or feel that sense of responsibility. So built in to how the program is developed is guarantee of sustainability, the commitment and sustainability of the person reading aloud in a neighbourhood, just because of that. *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

> For most programs of education, I later found out, experts sit around a table and study an education program, for another community that they never grew up in. So they don't really get it, no matter how much they imagine or try. They invent a program within days or weeks at best, month at the best. *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

Community engagement and impact

Participants noted that their motivation and commitment to the program was further enhanced upon seeing the engagement with the various community members (children, parents, and volunteers). Participants said that witnessing the immediate and visible positive impact on the different parties involved also enhanced their motivation. In many cases, community engagement also consisted of various community members providing practical help and support to the volunteers. Participants explained that the engagement with the community ensured the sustainability of volunteers in the program and offered solutions to potential problems they faced. Specifically, different community members offered help to sustain the volunteers' reading sessions, either through spreading the news about the sessions, providing money for new books, or searching for a location for the reading sessions to take place. A member of the WLR staff mentioned that "The community itself sustained the solution. Why? Because they saw the impact on their children … because they believe in it." While another participant explained that "The people started looking for a place for the volunteer to read—when she wanted to stop reading, they told her "no wait." The imam of the mosque gave her a part of his house to read in."

Participants noted that community engagement also included support from peers or other volunteers who were running the reading sessions. In particular, WLR enabled community or peer engagement through their training sessions in which volunteers had the opportunity to share their fears and concerns with other volunteers during the training.

> I put the problem that was submitted anonymously out there, and see what they might offer as solutions. In that way, the training stays supported by the community itself. The ideas come from them. So they feel a certain credibility and they have faith – when they try it they think, indeed, what was talked about in the training did occur. *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

Successfully engaging the community enhanced the volunteers' motivation and commitment. Many participants noted that the success of the program depends on the ability to notice the visible positive impact on children, parents and the community. A member of the WLR staff mentioned that "Most of them come back very shocked, we didn't expect that our children would leave their phone to come listen to the story … A big shift occurs in the perception, oh it really did make a change." Similarly, another participant expressed that:

> What makes volunteers continue with the sessions is not WLR, it is the children themselves. If you tell a child there is a reading session every Saturday; and if they come one Saturday and don't find the reading session, they make a big fuss saying "I want it now." *(WLR volunteer, female)*

Participants expressed that the positive impact of the program is also noticeable on the volunteers themselves. This further sustained their motivation to persevere with the program.

> Their voluntary work is something that helps them a lot. It supports them to continue in their life and to find a purpose. So the idea of the project itself has psychosocial support; something that supports their mental health in a very nice way. *(Member of WLR staff, female)*

On the whole, participants of the study expressed that the challenge in implementing the program lies in finding and keeping motivated volunteers. That is, attaining the right balance in motivating volunteers is at the crux of the program sustainability. On the one hand, participants find that volunteers are motivated when they are given the tools and confidence to manage their own contributions to the program. This adheres to the program's features of flexibility and informality. On the other hand, there is insufficient incentivisation and a lack of structured assessment which can decrease volunteers' motivation and their contributions long-term.

Discussion

Developing and implementing an intervention program requires obtaining the right balance that ensures the long-term sustainability of the program. Specifically, achieving the balance included

having an informal and flexible program on the one hand and creating the necessary motivation and commitment in volunteers on the other. In the present program, reading sessions are designed to be convenient for the volunteers providing them, however, too much freedom may deter their efforts long-term. While many participants appreciated having the freedom to decide their contributions, others expressly claimed a more fine-tuned system of motivation is needed. Engaging volunteers for the long term may pose new challenges which do not necessarily appear when implementing a time-limited intervention. While previous interventions highlight the challenges they face in shorter programs (e.g., 12-week interventions), this program points to a specific challenge that arises when attempting to achieve sustainability in a long-term project.

One practical suggestion is to offer a long-term structured system of motivation and incentivisation which can be incorporated into the volunteer experience, but only for the subgroup who are willing to take part in it. This can maintain the interest of volunteers who want to see their progress tracked and have more quantifiable methods reflecting their achievements. The program may then offer two tracks for volunteers based on their pace and interest. This would ensure that volunteers who are looking to commit for years ahead can have a plan and a system that keeps them engaged. A more structured program of motivation may include more educational workshops and trainings as one progresses as well as celebratory events to mark certain milestones.

Another practical suggestion put forth by the participants is to establish a community that better connects the volunteers and sustains their work. This can look like developing a shared and open space where volunteers can report their progress to their peers and share problems or concerns with one another. The program can establish a volunteer support network that connects the volunteers either virtually or through face-to-face meet ups. While the latter requires additional funds, organizing a support network can ensure that volunteers have a reliable source of contact with each other as well as with the organizing team.

This in turn can further help volunteers through cementing a safe community and social environment. While WLR offers a space at the initial training, a more structured follow up can help ensure the volunteers' dedicated involvement to the program. Importantly, previous interventions in refugee settings have depended on strengthening community and family ties for the success of their program (Lafromboise & Lewis, 2008; Weine, 2011) and were able to build on previously recognized protective factors. At the base, WLR emphasizes and builds on community strengths through utilizing existing connections between community members, but further protective community environments can be built through investing in events that keep volunteers engaged and connected.

Compared to programs in refugee contexts, this program similarly emphasizes harnessing community resilience (Norris et al., 2008; Baptiste et al., 2007; Hohmann and Shear, 2002). The programs in refugee contexts tend to recognize the existing power of the community and attempt to enhance participants' access to a wider social network. They may build upon the social connections between people and attempt to preserve or nurture them. WLR brings the community together through gathering children for reading stories and harnesses the connections between people to expand these reading sessions (recruiting children and more volunteers). A strength of this and similar programs is community collaboration and engagement, which can allow co-learning within the environment, create ownership, and build on family values (Baptiste et al., 2007).

With regards to previous interventions in refugee environments, Weine (2011) outlined several characteristics that interventions should meet, such as being culturally tailored, acceptability, prosaicness, and feasibility, among others. According to participants, the present program fulfills a number of these characteristics. While participants have expressed that the program is culturally representative and is accepted by the community, a high and persistent level of engagement and participation from all parties is clear indication of its acceptance. Additional research can evaluate whether high participation is sustained over time in this program, providing a quantitative assessment of its impact and participant engagement. Weine (2011) has similarly noted that interventions in refugee environments benefit from being prosaic. The program is similarly clear

and aims to be understandable and straightforward to those engaging in it. However, in order to ensure feasibility, this will require the program to be cost-effective. While the program attempts to be cost-effective, engaging and motivating volunteers long-term to ensure the sustainability of the program will undoubtedly require more funds than initially proclaimed by the WLR team. As such, the question of the program's feasibility may depend on a steady influx of funding. While the program's flexibility and grassroots nature are crucial to its success, securing government buy-in could also enhance its scalability and long-term sustainability.

There are several limitations to this research. One limitation is the subgroup of volunteers and WLR team members who were interviewed. These individuals were motivated by the program, convinced of the program's philosophy and strategy, and expressed their commitment to continuing their reading sessions. Although the challenges faced and points for improvement were discussed, participants' responses may have been impacted by their positive experiences in the program. Another limitation is that the impact of the program on children and parents is explored only from the perspective of the volunteers and WLR team. Gaining a better understanding on the limitations of the program as it is applied can be obtained from interviewing this subgroup of participants. One strength of the study is its focus on local interventions, highlighting community engagement and cultural relevance, whilst also addressing the positionality of the researchers leading the study. By examining the factors that contribute to program sustainability in this context, the study also provides valuable guidance for creating more resilient and long-lasting intervention models.

Eliciting long-term commitment from the volunteers might require adding a structured system of motivation. In order to understand this better, measuring and assessing volunteers' engagement and progress is needed. Future studies on this and similar programs can also explore the factors that enhance volunteer commitment and factors that hinder their efforts at continuing. Future research can also explore the experiences of volunteers who were in programs for a shorter period of time and chose to discontinue their involvement. While they may prove more difficult to recruit, this can help researchers incorporate their feedback and build on their experiences. Another interesting subgroup to interview would be participants who took part in the training, expressed an initial interest, but did not begin the reading sessions. It would be interesting to explore the factors which dissuaded them from starting the sessions, be it practicalities, logistics or a lack of faith in the effectiveness of the program. In conclusion, similar programs which aim to achieve longevity may benefit from understanding the motivations of their volunteers. When developing and implementing a new program, investing in ways to find the correct balance between having freedom and ownership and a long-term vision of commitment for volunteers may ensure the success of a program.

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