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Macire Aribot
Columbia University

Nassim Ashford
Yale University

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IMPACT OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINE WAR AFRICAN STUDENTS AND FAMILIES: COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH APPROACH TO HUMANITARIAN MUTUAL AID

Macire Aribot¹

Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs, New York, NY 10027, USA

Nassim Ashford²

Yale University, School of Public Health, New Haven, CT 06520, USA

ABSTRACT

Africans and African-descent refugees from Ukraine have faced racism and discrimination since the onset of the Russian-Ukraine war. When seeking refuge in neighboring countries, African people experienced differences in treatment when crossing the borders of European countries. Historically, European countries have enforced strict anti-immigration policies to deter Black and Brown people of color from migrating to their countries. This paper explores racism and discrimination experienced by African and African-descent refugees fleeing Ukraine and the inequity in the global humanitarian response for Africans and other people of color affected by the Russia-Ukraine war. As a result, this paper will highlight community-based, pan-Africanist, approaches to humanitarian mutual aid.

BACKGROUND

On February 24, 2022, Russian forces launched an armed military invasion of Ukraine, leading to the decimation of entire cities, critical infrastructure, and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. As a result, millions of people, both Ukrainian nationals and non-Ukrainian nationals living in the country, sought passage and refuge in neighboring countries. As the crisis unfolded, reports emerged of African and African-descent people, predominantly students, families, and working professionals, facing significant barriers to safely evacuating the country. Many were refused from border crossings, forcibly removed from trains and buses, and made long hours in extreme weather (Ray, 2022). Students also reported segregation at the border, where they were separated into two lines: one for white Ukrainians and the other for Black and Brown 'third country nationals' (Busari, et al., 2022). In addition to reports of discrimination, about 100 African students were stranded in bunkers in Kherson, Ukraine, during Russian bombardments and increased military conflict. These students were left without access to transportation to the Ukrainian border, electricity, food, water, or heat. Despite unanswered calls for a humanitarian corridor, students were forced to evacuate themselves with limited support from their governments (Maseko, 2022).

Since the Soviet Era, Ukrainian universities have actively recruited students from the African continent. As a result, nearly a quarter of international students in Ukraine are from African countries. For international students, Ukrainian universities were a more affordable education alternative to studying in Western Europe and the United States. It also served as a gateway to the European job market, offering affordable course prices, straightforward visa terms, and the possibility of permanent residency. However, since February, more than 10,000 African students have fled Ukraine, many of whom are in neighboring European countries and concerned with the future of their education. These refugee students have limited support and access to food, housing, and other necessities (Fröhlich, 2022).

BLACK/AFRICAN-LED HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

The goal of this paper is to explore community-centered approaches to international humanitarian aid with a focus on decolonizing and decentering traditional power imbalances within humanitarian responses. For the purpose of the report, decolonization of humanitarian aid refers to the social justice



approach needed for organizations to take in order to address the historical instances of racism and coloniality that may impact their work. Decolonization of humanitarian responses leads organizations to move away from making decisions on behalf of the people they serve while providing technical assistance and resources (Aloudat, 2022).

NoirUnited International

NoirUnited International (NUI) is a global development and humanitarian aid organization that focuses on centering Black and other marginalized people in creating development solutions for their communities. Founded in 2020 in response to the death of George Floyd and the global Black Lives Matter movement, NUI saw a need for a Black-led international organization rooted in an anti-racist ideology that addressed the pressing challenges that Black communities face around the world. NoirUnited aims to raise awareness of issues pertinent to Black and other marginalized groups, foster cross-cultural connections amongst the Black diaspora and find comprehensive and community-based solutions to systemic problems.

NUI believes in using community-based knowledge to guide our initiatives and programs. Throughout this crisis, our goal has been to garner as much support for Black communities and other marginalized communities that are often overlooked, mistreated, and left behind in times of crisis. NoirUnited has also raised awareness of the racism and discrimination that Black people have faced in Ukraine and neighboring countries and provided immediate humanitarian assistance and access to continued educational opportunities for students caught in the conflict.

PROBLEM STATEMENT/JUSTIFICATION

While millions in donations and humanitarian aid continue to be allocated to support Ukraine, African and African descent refugees from Ukraine have been overlooked. Furthermore, African communities and organizations are not prioritized in receiving direct access to humanitarian aid and are in critical need of basic necessities to support their community members. As a Black-led, community-based NGO, NUI aims to address the disparity in humanitarian support received by those affected by the Russia-Ukraine war and provide direct assistance to African and African-descent refugees from Ukraine.

METHODOLOGY

NUI believes qualitative and quantitative research should be the driving force in finding solutions for development. NUI utilizes both qualitative and quantitative tools, including participant focus groups, informational interviews, and surveys. NUI identified key issues to advocate for policies, resource allocation, and support for refugees from Ukraine. With our research, we will design socioeconomic programs geared toward supporting and empowering African and African-descent communities from Ukraine.

PROJECT GOAL

NoirUnited's goal is to provide humanitarian assistance to African and African-descent refugees affected by the war in Ukraine. This vulnerable community will be supported with access to food, health services, clothing, housing assistance, and direct cash assistance to meet their basic needs and rights. In addition to basic needs, NUI will provide legal aid to those facing barriers to immigration policies. NUI takes a pan-Africanist approach to increase awareness and advocacy by connecting with Black/African-led organizations across the diaspora to garner transnational support.

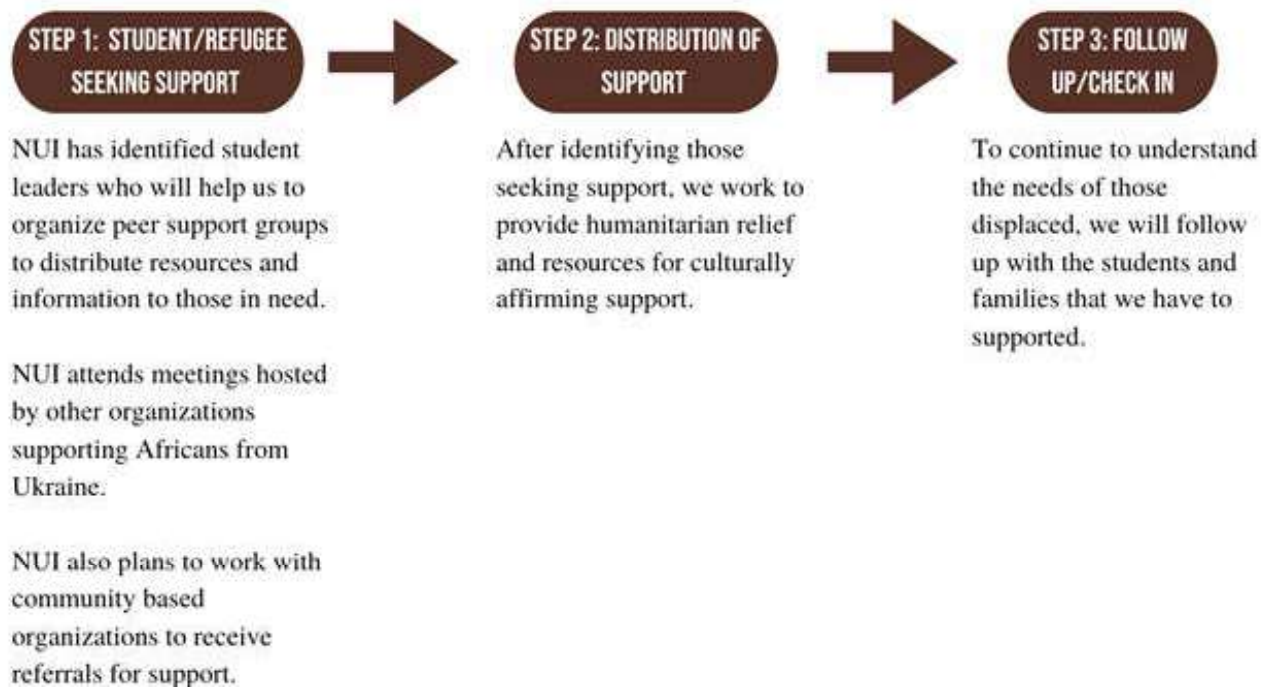


NOIRUNITED INTERNATIONAL (NUI) STRATEGIC PHASES FOR UKRAINE RESPONSE

- 1. Disaster relief:** NUI worked closely with partners on the ground in Ukraine to assist in the safe evacuation of African refugees from Sumy, Ukraine, and Kherson, Ukraine. During this period, NoirUnited helped to provide culturally-relevant food, water, and emotional support. NUI also provided financial support for transportation to destination cities and helped to resettle African refugees in temporary housing.
- 2. Transition period:** Many students and families of African descent are trying to determine their next steps: what city to settle in, where to continue their education, and how to support themselves financially. During this phase, NUI worked to build strategic relationships with African community organizations to collaborate and engage community members on how to support African refugees from Ukraine. NUI also prioritized working directly with student leaders to determine and assess their needs.

Sustainable development: NUI aims to provide assistance that will prove to be sustainable and long-lasting. This includes: establishing economic empowerment programs, supporting psychosocial wellness, providing legal support to navigate discriminatory immigration policies, and securing partnerships with universities for students to continue their education.

NUI Referral Pathway



(Figure 1): Pathway for referrals for those seeking support from NUI.



INTERVENTIONS

1. Education and Technology Support for African Students from Ukraine

NUI is working to support the placement of African students from Ukraine in universities to continue the education they began while in Ukraine. NUI has created partnerships with universities and negotiated guaranteed financial support and scholarships for students. Throughout this process, NUI has assisted students needing financial support to cover costs associated with submitting applications and student visas. NUI also works with students directly to acquire necessary documents, complete applications, and assist with student visa applications.

NoirUnited expects displaced Black students to be accepted and admitted into higher education institutions to complete the education they began while in Ukraine. By supporting these students, NUI hopes to help students avoid the high stress associated with the financial costs of pursuing an education. So far, NUI has been able to secure partnerships with schools such as Kean University, which has allocated funding to support a group of 90 students who were referred by NoirUnited. As of now, this fund will cover tuition, fees, and housing for students.

To promote the economic empowerment of students, NUI has sought out local community members to provide training and job opportunities for African students. NUI is sponsoring an IT program for students to gain marketable skills to help them find employment. The three-month program is comprised of 6 courses, including Web Development, SQL database design, Crypto, Cloud Computing, Digital Marketing, and Graphic Design. Students select the program that interests them most, and upon completion, they will receive a certificate of completion. There are currently 100 displaced students participating in the program, with 8-course instructors

2. Food and Housing Assistance

By partnering with local African grocery stores and restaurants, NUI provides students and families with culturally relevant food items. NoirUnited will assist with the distribution of culturally relevant foods to community members in need. Local partners will play a significant role in providing foodstuffs to Black and other third-country national refugees. In terms of housing, NUI plans to assist in finding housing accommodations and provide direct funding to cover a portion of housing costs as needed.

3. Mental Health and Trauma Care

Racial discrimination combined with the trauma of war has negatively and disproportionately affected Black refugees fleeing Ukraine. Thus, it is crucial to provide Black refugees from Ukraine with trauma-informed and culturally affirming mental health support. NUI has sourced mental health professionals for both online and in-person therapy sessions for those in need.

NUI also provided programming for non-traditional forms of therapy, such as communal healing circles and painting/art classes. These spaces were not a substitute for individualized therapy; however, they allowed refugees to cope with some of the feelings they had in a safe environment. NoirUnited has worked with the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) to host culturally affirming healing circles for African refugees from Ukraine and will continue to host spaces as needed. The healing circles included a mix of those from Ukraine, mental health professionals, and community members from the African diaspora to listen to the experiences of those from the war.



Art and painting classes will be used in addition to the counseling sessions and healing circles to provide variety in the treatment available to those suffering from trauma. Art therapy interventions in combination with psychotherapy treatment have been shown to decrease symptoms of trauma in adults (Schouten, 2015). Using art as a medium will help refugees to express suppressed emotions and experiences they have faced.

4. Support for Vulnerable Women and children

Black refugee women have been disproportionately affected by the war in Ukraine and are most vulnerable. NUI will organize community programs and provide women and children with the basic necessities needed. Women are particularly in need of hygiene and contraceptive products, medical support, protection from gender-based violence, and socio-economic empowerment. NUI will organize women-only spaces to foster community and social support amongst Black refugee women while also emphasizing the need to focus on female students and the unique experiences they've faced. NUI team will directly organize and lead women-friendly spaces in partnership with group leaders amongst the refugees who are best equipped to identify the need of refugee women from Ukraine. These spaces will provide women with resources and support services in Poland and Ukraine through NUI pathways. This includes resources for psychological support, legal support, local hospitals, prenatal and post-natal support, childcare, sexual and reproductive health, GBV prevention, job opportunities, and educational opportunities.

5. Direct Cash Assistance

NUI believes in the power of agency and ensuring that Black refugees are able to make individual choices based on personal needs. Using direct cash payments will allow immediate access to monetary funds for refugees to select items and pay for things that they need most. The use of cash-based interventions is long-term when compared with just food aid from humanitarian actors (Elayah, 2022).

CONCLUSION

NoirUnited's goal is to garner as much support for Black communities that are often overlooked, mistreated, and left behind in times of crisis. The disparity in humanitarian response and aid for African and African-descent refugees from Ukraine highlights the need to address the role of racism and discrimination in determining who deserves assistance in times of crisis. Throughout the Russia-Ukraine war, the lives of Ukrainians have been and continue to be prioritized over the lives of Africans and African-descent peoples who also fled Ukraine. As European nations lifted their strict immigration policies to open their borders and provide considerable support to Ukrainian nationals, however, the same level of support has not been provided to African peoples. The lack of consideration for African and African-descent refugees from Ukraine occurs not only at the state level but also through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on providing humanitarian assistance. Again, Ukrainian nationals are prioritized over African 'third country nationals' despite fleeing the same conflict.

This issue highlights the need for Black/African-led international NGOs, such as NoirUnited International, to center on the needs of African and African descent in times of crisis while garnering support from community members across the African diaspora. Through collective support and action, situations, where African peoples suffer from racism and are disregarded in humanitarian assistance can be prevented.



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