

Motivating a Volunteer-run, Student-led Refugee Support Group: Reflecting on the Intersections between Research and Action in Addressing Refugee Vulnerabilities in Japan

A Conversation with Professor David Slater, Faculty Advisor for the Sophia Refugee Support Group and Project Director at Refugee Voices Japan

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David Slater, Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Sophia University, is Project Director at [Refugee Voices Japan](#), and faculty advisor for the [Sophia Refugee Support Group \(SRSG\)](#) - a student-led, volunteer-run refugee and asylum seeker support organization based at Sophia University in Tokyo. Founded in 2017, SRSG seeks to serve as a bridge between Japanese society and the community of refugees in Japan. It is one of the consultation partners for the migration subgroup of the [Toyota Foundation-funded project](#), “[Research, Mutual Learning and Network Formation on Human Rights Best Practices by Non-State Actors in COVID Responses](#)”. As [the migration subgroup reported](#), the student-led organization faced challenges in sustaining activities, navigating funding constraints, and maintaining a sense of motivation and drive among its members amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond the imperative to adapt, and to continue the indispensable work it has been doing for refugees in Japan, I am curious to find out how Prof. Slater propels SRSG’s advocacy. More importantly, how does he maneuver the organization through the intersections between the academic space and the landscape of rights advocacy?

To answer this question, I spoke to Prof. Slater as part of the Project’s concluding activities. In our conversation, we reflected on the following themes: (1) incorporating advocacy work into the learning process; (2) the benefits of a ‘student-led group’ model in organizing support for vulnerable populations; (3) the relevance of a rights-based approach in supporting refugees; (4) his role as both a teacher and inspirer to student volunteers; and, (5) lessons from his work with SRSG which may be transferable to other non-State actors working in support of human rights protection.

Embracing advocacy in the learning process

Professor Slater’s engagement with the refugee community in Japan started when he was working in a soup kitchen serving homeless persons in Japan. Through this soup kitchen, he conducts interviews as part of his anthropological research. This gave homeless people a chance to tell their story and talk about the difficulties they face. Acknowledging their predicament is crucial because, as Prof. Slater points out, being homeless in Japan carries a lot of shame with it. The interviews were part of a four-credit course on oral narratives where students collect interviews from vulnerable and marginalized groups. Apart from collecting narratives from homeless persons, Prof. Slater and students in this course have collected narratives from youth protesters and survivors of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in the Tōhoku region.

In the soup kitchen, he became friends with a refugee who regularly helps them in the initiative. At one point, the man disappeared for months. Apparently, this was the time when the refugee was placed in a detention center. When the man returned to the soup kitchen after months of being in detention, he suggested that Prof. Slater do something similar for the refugee community in Japan. He explains to me how he did so:

Professor Slater:

He said that we really should be doing it with this other population - refugees. I was like, 'refugees? In Japan? What are you talking about?' I had no idea they were even here. At that time, we had already been working on an oral narrative approach to research. We knew how to do this. The first part of this was to turn it into a class where the students would do the research, get to know the refugee narrators, and write it up and post it on our website - Refugee Voices Japan. At the end of the first semester, the students realized how bad it is. They saw that there was almost no support for these people, as opposed to, say, those displaced from the Tōhoku disaster. For the survivors of the earthquake and tsunami, there was a lot of government support. There is no government support for refugees. That's when they started the Sophia Refugee Support Group. After doing the research and realizing what the needs were, they started the Group. In the beginning, we were very small, around 12 people. But, it was enough to start it up. We just kept on growing from there.

The key is to have a course that students are getting credit for. It establishes itself within the University. Instead of it just being a student activity which I am facilitating through the class, it's part of the curriculum. The class and the research group are able to go back and forth. Sophia University supported our initiatives. Why was this possible in the beginning? It was not only because of the students, but also because it was something I'm doing either through my own research or through the curriculum. That turned out to be a very important thing. Even now it's still very important.

It was important for Prof. Slater that this new initiative became part of academic work he has been doing. However, I was interested in whether students shared the same curiosity he had in research methodology and advocacy. In a way, he was incorporating advocacy into the learning process. Does he see the academic approach as an ideal means of initiating advocacy?

Professor Slater:

In the beginning, that was true. All the students in my class were the same people who were in the Sophia Refugee Support Group. They were the same group of 12 to 20 students. However, SRSG got bigger. We are now up to about 100 to 120 students. There are a lot of students who are not necessarily interested in anthropology. They aren't really that interested in the academic study of the issues, but they also want to go and chat with the refugees. I'm not trying to say that you need to understand all the issues nor that you need to take my class. As long as

they're willing to understand the basic outlines of what's going on, they don't have to be anthropologists. You do need to understand where refugees come from, why they are here, and what challenges they are facing. They don't need to know how to do interviews. Most of them don't take my class now, because there's about a hundred of them, and I only have about 10 or 15 students per year taking the course. So, it's morphed into something quite a bit larger.

The 'pluses' and 'minuses' of being a student-led group

According to Prof. Slater, being a student-led group has both advantages and disadvantages. As SRSG's advisor, he is tasked with navigating through challenges and opportunities facing them as an organization. He explains:

Professor Slater:

*It very quickly got beyond my ability to manage it. The academic part is so busy that it's impossible to manage on my own. So, one advantage is, because it became somewhat disassociated with my research and my teaching, it ended up taking a life of its own. That delegates responsibility to the students. **If you are good at choosing student leaders, it propagates itself without me having to check on it all the time. I am getting better at helping them choose leaders.** That is very important. Usually the leaders are people who have taken my class. They understand the larger theoretical issues. Because they've done detailed research, they really understand refugees' lives. The skill set of running a hundred-person student group is very different from interviewing. You can't really compare those two.*

The second advantage is that because they are a student group, they are able to get some support from the school. They receive some funding and space to get things done as a student group. They use them for the Refugee Cafés, for their meetings, and things like that. Being both a student group and a research group gives us access to resources which are important for the things we do.



Photo: Ai Kihara-Hunt, SRSR Refugee Café (February 2025), Sophia University

*The downside of that is some of them without that kind of theoretical background may have a superficial understanding of the issues. At first, I was worried about that. But actually, **you don't have to be an anthropologist to be a good supporter. As soon as I broke out of that and stopped trying to turn them into something that they weren't interested in doing, it went a lot smoother.** In essence, the Refugee Cafés, which we hold regularly, is part of my research. It's a way for me to get new people into our program. Another challenge is that the students rotate through, and the only person that has been standing there is me. The refugees also rotate through. Some of them stay, for better or worse, but I am the only one who is there. Unfortunately, I am retiring soon, so we're in a bit of a crisis. We're not quite sure what is going to happen.*

Thinking of refugee rights

The Refugee Café is one of the regular activities facilitated by the SRSR. On the one hand, these regular events are a way for refugees to interact and develop genuine friendships with Sophia University students. On the other hand, it is a way for SRSR to gain a deeper level of trust from the vulnerable population it seeks to support and protect. Such advocacy work calls for a good understanding of refugee vulnerability and human rights. I ask Prof. Slater about the importance of refugee rights in their anthropological approach. He explains:

Professor Slater:

Everybody was here for refugee rights, because of questions on civil rights and social justice. Those were the issues that motivated us to start, and they continue to animate the research

group. The people in the Support Group have all kinds of different interests and backgrounds, so it's not limited to rights protection or research. The other side of that is that many of the Japanese students are not used to being critical of their own government. It is shocking and surprising to them when they find out how badly refugees are treated here. I have to say, I exploit that moment of shock and shame, and challenge them: 'this is the reality we're living in. What does it mean? How do we tell this story? How do we understand what their rights are? How do we use that as a way to motivate the research? How do we use that knowledge of violations of procedure and rights to support them better?' So, the research part and the Support Group always go hand in hand.



Photo: David Slater and Ayaka Komatsu, SRSR Refugee Café, Sophia University

It's only because we did research first that we were able to do targeted advocacy. Many groups don't have the luxury that we do. Most support groups don't conduct research. Some of them have no idea about the vulnerabilities and needs, except from casual conversation. We have the lecture part because we have the academic component that helps us go into detail on the different stages, the different needs, and the different gaps. This makes the support component much more targeted. For example, we're about to start a new semester in a couple of weeks, and I am going to ask three or four of my refugee friends whom I've known now for probably a year or two, because they've been going to the Refugee Cafés, and they know me well...we ask them to do seven interviews with us over the course of the semester. We ask about their experience of being a refugee. So, the Support Group makes the research better. I've seen so many research projects where you go and meet the person for the first time and you interview them one time that day, and that's the end of it. For us, we've known them for a couple of years and we've conducted this research with them through seven or eight different two-to three-hour hour interviews each time. So, ***our approach is different and is very motivated by ideas of human rights and dignity.***

Research(ers) with societal impact

Research has, thus, remained an important part of the work that SRSG does for the refugee community in Japan. More importantly, however, I find that advocacy, and the imperative to have a societal impact, has changed Prof. Slater's views on what meaningful academic research implies. As he explains, SRSG's advocacy and research are both driven by their intended impact on the refugee community in Japan:

Professor Slater:

*There are research groups all over the world, not just in Japan and not just about refugees, where they do their research, get it published, and that's the end of it. That was never our goal, which is why all of our publications are open source. Our website has detailed stuff that we give away. I guess, at the heart of it is the idea that this has to be applied research. I've done that since 3/11, since the earthquake and the tsunami. Unless the research that we're doing has an application component, we don't do it. For us, **we have to have an ability to use the knowledge that we generate to impact individual people's lives.** If we can't do that, I might as well just choose a different topic. That limits the kinds of things we can do because you can't help everybody. It also has a perverting effect on some of the research. So, for example, a lot of the research that we do with refugees is about issues on their refugee visa status. We can't write about any of that. Because we don't write about it, that silence is kind of perverting. That is the academic problem, in some ways. We could do everything anonymously. When I have only my scholarly hat on, we anonymize everyone's names. That's not part of advocacy. But, it does mean we have to sanitize some of our research because the biggest thing is to do no harm in the process.*

*Telling the truth for the sake of truth is not what drives us. Telling the truth for the sake of the truth that can help the people we're talking about - that's what drives us. It's not a choice that everybody would make. Sometimes students say, 'well, if we can't explain the reasons why refugees are forced to break the law, people won't understand how messed up the law is'. I say, 'that's exactly true'. We understand in class, but we don't publish that. **You function within the parameters of the reality of people's real lives and not just the scholarly motivations.** When I was young, I cared more about whether it looked like scholarship or something targeting academia, but I don't care about this as much anymore. People are so imbued in that scholarly ivory tower that they want to make sure things look 'academic'. We don't worry about that. But, I am cognizant of the scholarly limitations that we put on ourselves because of that.*

The 'Faculty Advisor' role

Motivating a student-led volunteer group focusing on the human rights of vulnerable refugees carries a lot of difficulties. As Prof. Slater pointed out, some students in the group become disillusioned after they find

out about the woeful reality that refugees experience in the country. I asked him how he motivates members, and how he sustains students' drive to make a difference through the Support Group:

Professor Slater:

There are two ways. One is by taking advantage of the 'white, male foreigner' part of who I am. Sometimes, Japanese students don't want foreigners telling them about how bad it is in Japan. I get that. On the other hand, I am able to say things that others might not be able to. Because of my outsider/semi-outsider status, or the perspective through which I am sometimes perceived, I'm able to speak truths that other people can't hear. Sometimes, students hear these things, and then they drop the class. That's fine. But, in part, that's my role within the university. I'm able to tell them, 'well, look at what's happening in Japan. Sometimes, it is similar to other places, and sometimes, it's just way out of step'. And so, by guiding them to that and letting them come to their own conclusions, it allows them to understand that there's human rights underneath there.



Photo: David Slater and Ayaka Komatsu, SRSR Refugee Café, Sophia University

*The second thing, which I think is more important, is that **talking to refugees, and learning about them, is about integration into people's lives.** When you interview somebody eight times in the course of a semester, for up to two hours each, you're talking about what happened back in their home country, how they left, why they chose to come to Japan, how they are surviving here, and how they went through immigration. You go beyond the knowledge that there are human rights violations and vulnerable peoples. You start to actually see the individual experiencing that violation, and gain a personal and intimate understanding of their often humiliating, dehumanizing experience. Students come away with a far deeper understanding than any kind of article they read can possibly give them. Both the conditions that forced [refugees] to leave, and their conditions here in Japan, keep the idea of human rights, the questions on violations, and the notion of human dignity at the*

forefront of [students'] minds. I don't really have to do anything. You listen to somebody's story and they pretty much go, 'I can't believe it'. It's baked into the design at this point.

Potential lessons for other non-State actors

SRSG's growth in number, as well as the various [commendations and awards](#) it has received, speak to the organization's success as a non-State actor, whose practices can be emulated by others. Their practice offers lessons for those seeking to support the protection of the rights of vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities. As Prof. Slater explains, the dynamic nature of the student-led volunteer model that he pioneered is, in itself, a lesson for other organizations dealing with the challenge of people coming and going:

Professor Slater:

*If there's anything that we are doing differently, it relates to how we deal with scale. We have a hundred to 120 students at any time within the group. Most NPOs in Japan are very small. They tend to be a small group of ideologically aligned, socially committed people who are there for a certain amount of time. That's great, but it's totally different from what we're doing. Nobody in our Group stays more than three years. So, **the Group needs to find some continuity, and it needs to have the ability to reproduce itself over time with new people. It is a challenge, but to an extent, the fact that they're all students enables this to happen.** If they were all working people, this whole model wouldn't work. What's great is we get a bunch of students who go on to graduate school in some kind of related thing, which is nice. I have to say, I'm proud of that, and I think that's great. I think having a strong background in what is actually happening on the ground can make them better scholars and allow their scholarship to make a real difference. The other side of it is that most of the students go on and get other jobs. I like to think that their experience has some kind of influence on the way they live, the way they choose their jobs, and what they do in their job and their life.*

So, I think the model is different from the other ones in terms of scale and in terms of duration. If our approach is to be of any use to anybody, I would say that one thing we do is we go to other universities and try to help them start their own Refugee Cafés. It's not easy. After I retire next year, it is absolutely possible that SRSG stops. I don't know. But, for those other universities, I would hope that some of those academics we engage with would do something similar to what we've been doing. I believe it is meaningful for the students, and contributes to people around them. It's a lot of work, but it is also within the boundaries of scholarly work that is also impactful to society.

***If there is anything people can learn from us, it is that students want to do important stuff and want to become involved in the world around them.** Students want to do something, and their teachers have to create the*

platform for that to happen. Professors and lecturers have access to different levels of legitimization to make this happen, whether it's through research, curriculum, or other resources. Once you do that, the students can come and pick it up and take it on their road. So, I don't think there is much we can teach other NPOs who are doing great work under often very difficult circumstances, and have much less money and institutional support than we have. I mean, in some ways, what we are doing is easy compared to what some of them are doing.

As in any organization, there can be uncertainties in terms of sustaining advocacy and operational models and maintaining the motivation of its members. SRSG is, for all intents and purposes, a student-led volunteer organization, and Prof. Slater's role as its navigator has been critical in the organization's stability and success. As his experience has shown, taking advantage of the intersections between academic research and human rights advocacy can help address the vulnerability of individuals which he ultimately considers partners and friends. As someone who aims to produce impactful academic work, myself, his work taught me that academia has great potential as a platform for rights-based societal impact. On behalf of the Team, I thank Prof. David Slater and the SRSG for their relevant contributions to the Project!