



**HUMANITARIAN
COLLABORATIVE**
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



read for action

the humanitarian book club

climate, conflict & humanitarian crisis

project analysis

november 2022 - march 2023

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authors:

Dr. Adrienne Ghaly and Prof. Kirsten Gelsdorf
with Kaleigh Mullins

project summary

core question

Can bringing **contemporary fiction** into conversation with **policy** and **advocacy challenges**

create **global communities** and

foster **durable** and **connective engagement** on **humanitarian crises**

through

conversations with experts grounding **large-scale policy challenges** in the **lived experiences** of **fictional** characters

with the aim of

inspiring **responsiveness** in readers to specific **real-world crises**?

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readforaction.org

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A team at the University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative led by Prof. Kirsten Gelsdorf and Dr. Adrienne Ghaly, in partnership with former Senior Humanitarian Officer Ruth Mukwana, and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) Strategic Communications Branch, ran a project from November 2022 - March 2023 investigating how contemporary fiction can foster connective engagement on urgent advocacy and policy challenges around humanitarian crises intertwined with climate, conflict, and environmental justice issues. The project is called Read for Action: the Humanitarian Book Club (RFA). On 7 Nov 2022, UNOCHA launched the pilot at the United Nations Climate Summit COP27.

The project's core question is how can literature and humanities approaches can offer fresh insights and new tools for public policy and advocacy challenges. The concept is to use fictional stories to create a global online reading community engaging with current humanitarian policy issues. Read for Action members join a global online conversation through our discussion platform and a series of live and recorded events and conversations, and receive weekly 'action' opportunities they can take with the community.

RFA uniquely brings together readers with authors, humanitarians, and scholars who discuss the books in relation to specific humanitarian policy challenges and needs that the novels explore. In addition to expanding the understanding of readers of current humanitarian crises, RFA also links readers to specific calls to action and real-time prosocial engagement opportunities.

key metrics

at a glance

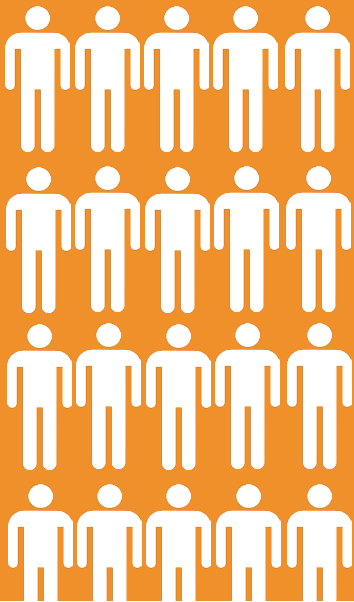
Project launched at COP27 in Egypt with **press release** from the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and **launch video** created by OCHA SCB.



Hosted **three livestream panels** with chosen books' authors and humanitarians, with each event garnering **200-400+ registrants** from around the world.

Hosted **12 online policy and engagement conversations** with **authors, journalists, humanitarian experts and scholars**, for a total of **21 speakers** across our events.

Humanitarian topics included displacement and migration, flooding, education in refugee camps, protection, climate reparations, the recent Loss and Damage framework, and ethical storytelling of affected communities.



Grew a **worldwide community** of over **1200 readers** from over **99 countries** in **four months**, over half from outside the United States.

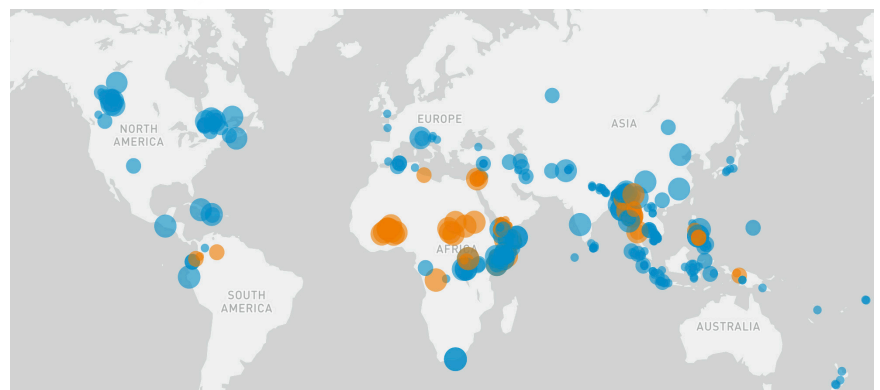
Developed a substantial online presence through the creation of the website and social media campaign: **8300 website visits** from **6300 unique users**; **over 100 posts** with **~22,000 impressions** on Instagram and **~26,000 views** on Twitter garnering **triple** the engagement rates for RFA posts compared with site averages.

Launched the **RFA Discord** server with **10 channels** for online discussion and engagement with an average of **87 visitors** and **38 messages** weekly.



Established external and internal partnerships and affiliations with leading international, national, and local entities to maximize RFA's reach across three distinct sectors, **humanitarian aid organizations** at the local and international scale, **publishing and independent bookstores**, and **major cultural organizations** and **institutions of higher learning**: **New York Review Books**, **National Model UN**, **the Center for Fiction**, **Africa is a Country**, **Lokal Lab**, **Radical Book Collective**, **bookshop.org**, **Bluebird and Co**, **the UVA Environmental Institute**, **Institute for the Humanities and Global Cultures**, **Environmental Humanities**, and **Brown College**.

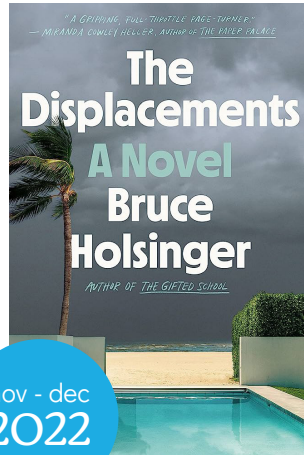
Presented, with participation from our readers, over **90 actions** to the **RFA community** on our action resource channel. In response to the Syria and Turkey earthquake, hosted a **live mapathon** for RFA readers with Humanitarian **OpenStreetMap**.



Launched the Read for Action website links to real-time displacement data, **27 recorded conversations** on literary and humanitarian policy discussions, a collection of over **70 actions**, and resources at the intersection of policy and humanities research.

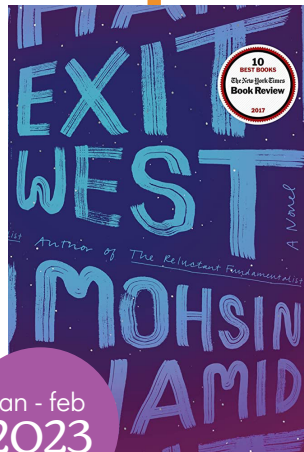
read for action timeline

The Displacements
by Bruce Holsinger
Riverhead Books
2022



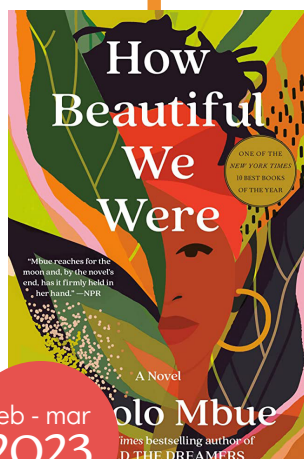
nov - dec
2022

Exit West
by Mohsin Hamid
Riverhead Books
2017



jan - feb
2023

How Beautiful We Were
by Imbolo Mbue
Random House
2021



feb - mar
2023

online global panels

The RFA community read three novels across five months from Mohsin Hamid (Pakistan), Bruce Holsinger (USA), and Imbolo Mbue (Cameroon/ USA) and the authors took part in online panels to discuss the books with humanitarians and experts at the end of the reading period. Across the reading period, guest speakers discussed core themes, and readers posted responses and questions in real time. Guest panelists included:

Omar El Akkad, journalist and author

Bruce Holsinger, author, *The Displacements*

Hawa Sabriye, UNICEF Somalia

Mohsin Hamid, author, *Exit West*

Anna Badkhen, author of *Bright Unbearable Reality*

Ruth Mukwana, Fmr. Senior Humanitarian Officer, UNOCHA (speaker and moderator)

Imbolo Mbue, author of *How Beautiful We Were*

Professor Olúfèmi Táíwò, Georgetown University, and author of *Climate Reparations*

Dr. Jemilah Mahmood, Director, Centre for Planetary Health, Sunway University, Malaysia

Professor Kirsten Gelsdorf, Public Policy, UVA (moderator)

Dr. Adrienne Ghaly, Humanitarian Collaborative Practitioner Fellow, UVA (moderator)

expert talks

Every week the RFA community engaged with different humanitarian policy experts, authors, and scholars to discuss the links between book themes and current humanitarian crises.

Experts included:

Eric Roston, Bloomberg News

Aida Mengistu, IASC Peer-to-Peer Support Project and formerly Deputy Head of UNOCHA's Regional Office for Southern and Eastern Africa

Saidatul Maisarah Faiesall Ahmad Faiesall, Youth Activist, and **Sarah Hanani Ahmad Tajuddin**, Centre for Planetary Health, Sunway University, Malaysia

Professor David Herd, English, University of Kent and co-founder, Refugee Tales Project

Emily Garin, Senior Director of Advocacy, Sesame Workshop

Professor Gloria Fisk, English, Queens College CUNY

Jacob Kurtzer, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Professor Cassandra Falke, English, University of Tromsø, Norway

Imma Mwanja, Global Projects Associate for Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team and **Will Evans**, formerly of Environmental Resilience Institute, UVA

in the classroom

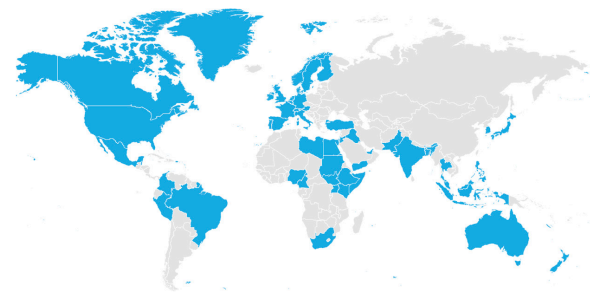
Outside of the platform, over 300 undergraduate and graduate University students participated in RFA through direct course engagement. These were one large advanced undergraduate lecture course in fall 2022 at the Batten School of Public Policy, LPPS 3295: Global Humanitarian Crises Response, and two graduate-level seminars in the College of Arts and Sciences in spring 2023, ENVH 6000: Introduction to Environmental Humanities, and PLPT 7500: Political Theory of Social Movements. Faculty at participating universities, both at UVA and at other institutions, successfully incorporated RFA books and online discussion and events into their courses in spring 2023, and reported high levels of in-class student engagement with RFA materials.

key policy issues and humanitarian themes

A selection of the key advocacy and policy issues discussed around the chosen RFA books:

- Access to education, especially early childhood education
- Pakistan flooding response
- Displacement camps
- The Loss and Damage framework agreed to at the UN Climate Conference COP27
- Ukraine crisis response
- climate-intensified flooding, drought, and displacement
- conflict zones
- migration and IDPs
- challenges of humanitarian workers' response

website reach



The RFA community is truly global and the website is a major hub for the community. During the project, it had over 8300 visits from 6300 unique users from over 99 countries, with sizable participation from Global South countries in Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, Eastern Africa, and the Asia Pacific region.

Map (above) shows countries with 20 or more RFA participants.

in the press

“Read for Action” profiled in Danish newspaper *Globalnyt*: Soren Steensig, “**Virtuel bogklub skaber humanitær handlekraft gennem litteratur.**” 25 Nov 2022.

Eric Williamson, “**Want to Help Save the World? This New Book Club Offers a Novel Approach**” *UVA Today*, 21 Nov 2022.

planned talks & publications

Research presentation, New York University's “**Cultures of War**” colloquium in fall 2023

Scholarly article and interview in international humanities journal *post45/Contemporaries* on the **uses of literature for public policy and applied contexts.**

Planned public-facing essay on **climate fiction and humanitarian relief** by one of our authors as a response to their RFA experience.

what we learned

depth engagement

A Common Object: Fictional stories enabled a shared conversation around a common object, regardless of the geopolitical knowledge or level of awareness on specific issues readers brought to the conversation. As a common object and point of reference for participants, fictional stories served as a powerful way for participants to engage with humanitarian policy challenges and prompted rich questions and discussion from RFA members.

Issues Were Rendered Concrete and Discussed Through the Experiences of Fictional Individuals: Exploring humanitarian issues through individual and small-group perspectives and the choices of characters rendered the issues concrete and real for readers, not as abstract and remote policy issues.

Freedom to Engage: Fictional stories enabled readers to discuss the challenges and choices of characters free of some of the ethical concerns that arise when discussing real people's experiences.

Engaging Complexity: Readers, humanitarians, scholars and experts across the project used the novels' scenes, character, themes, storytelling structures and point-of-view to grapple with the complexity of humanitarian crises and responses to them. Readers consistently responded with interest, surprise, willingness to learn, and engaged questions for guest speakers and panelists around the issues the novels raised – disaster response, conflict, education, displacement and IDPs, loss and damage.

utility of fictional stories for humanitarian experts and policy makers

Impact for Humanitarian Experts and Policy Makers: While the purpose of the project was to engage broader audiences and learn lessons on how public advocacy efforts may be more effective, it has had unintended consequences for policy makers themselves. Many of the humanitarian policy experts who spoke on panels or in the weekly discussions remarked how discussing the books allowed them to think more expansively about potential policy changes and ‘imagined futures’ that could be explored.

Changing Relations to Affected Populations: Guest speakers reported that discussing the books created different and positive emotional engagement to humanitarian and climate contexts, and

that the books created connections for them to affected populations in less compartmentalized ways, and ways that did not engender empathy fatigue.

style and content of stories

The Style and Content of the Chosen

Novels: Chosen novels have highly engaging characters and plotlines, written in accessible styles. They engage with core policy issues that the humanitarian and policy experts can make use of to address specific real-world concerns.

Fiction's Flexibility for Connecting to Real-World Crises: Crucially, literary fiction's focus on the experiential and emotional lives of characters and on rich fictional world-building gave the stories great flexibility and capaciousness for addressing real-world crises. Two of the chosen stories were located in fictional or unnamed countries, which gave readers a global remit to imagine where the stories could be taking place, and offered multiple potential contexts for experts to connect the stories of flooding, drought, displacement, and conflict to issues in multiple, specific geopolitical contexts.

timing of reading and events

Timing for Reading Period: The book with the greatest online engagement was *Exit West*, correlating with the weeks after the post-winter break period on the university and school calendar. This gave readers time to read the book.

Timing for Discussion and Online

Events: Many readers did not engage online in discussions until they had finished the book to avoid accidentally seeing plot 'spoilers' by other RFA community members. The greatest engagement period was in the week preceding the final panel discussion at the end of the reading period. Consequently, future iterations will cluster online discussions and events towards the end of the reading period, rather than spread across the reading period.

potential of online platforms for depth engagement

Breaking New Ground Using Online Platforms for Policy Engagement and Real-Time Interactions: RFA was not only a pilot about the power of fiction to address public advocacy and policy challenges, it was also a pilot to test Discord and online platforms centered around discussion for future advocacy uses. The key takeaway is that platforms that enable and encourage community-building exchanges and depth engagement should be investigated further as an underutilized resource for advocacy and policy, especially for constituencies UNOCHA aims to reach, specifically youth.

Readers Responded to Online Engagement: Readers responded to specific prompts and questions by the RFA team, to live recorded conversations with authors and panelists, and to other readers' comments and questions. More online content and engagement corresponded to more engagement from readers.

Platform Learning Curve: The greatest challenge to the project was the steep learning curve for both the RFA team and RFA readers of the relatively new social media platform, Discord, and the platform's user interface. Elements such as creating and navigating the basic infrastructure of the site, the number of discussion channels, the use of text, audio, and visual media, and user familiarity with the 'norms' of the site, were relative unknowns for many participants. RFA is actively exploring other online platforms with simpler interfaces and geared towards conversation and towards book club communities, such as Slack, bookclubs.com, and Storygraph.

There is considerable growth potential to combine online and in-person community-building and engagement through RFA 'satellite' book clubs located at universities and institutions that combine in-person discussion in university courses with online engagement and content provided by our guest speakers and multi-disciplinary panel conversations.

annex

Depth Engagement Examples from RFA Readers from Our Online Discussion Platform

Depth Engagement: online conversation about [The Displacements](#)

Each paragraph is a separate response from an RFA reader.

RFA Member Responses to the novel's portrayal of humanitarian response during disasters, setting up displacement camps, IDPs:

1. **"I'm really curious about the activation timeline of FEMA / disaster response agencies when storms like Luna are forecast. Seems like in order to organize a response the moment it is needed, you have to have a lot of things in motion long before a storm makes landfall. Like, are there warehouses scattered across the country where pop-up shelters are stored? How are sites for camps chosen? Is it public land? Are there instances where private land is used? And how are landowners compensated? Would love to hear more about the chain of events that happens ahead of time...** and how often tons of work goes into preparing for storm events that end up fizzling."
2. "Yeah, such a tricky and heartbreaking thing. I can see it from both sides - people are already traumatized, pets are part of the family, you could add more trauma by separating them or allow them to maintain some joy by keeping them together. And then, I can also see mountains of dog poo bags piling up at a camp, or fights between pets, people with cat allergies... it makes sense it could be a mess. **I'm so new to the humanitarian response space and this book is making me think about things I've never considered.**"
3. **"This reminded me of listening to people reflecting on Katrina a decade later, interviewing survivors.** One woman described how she was a nurse earning good money, nice house, cash for vacations and extras. But In the weeks after Katrina she found herself outside Target in Texas, begging for diapers. Whatever the other factors are, that always stuck with me that unless someone is Musk-level wealthy (billionaires I'm sure have their own backup plans) the "average rich" or **upper middle class are vulnerable to disruptions** in electricity, access to money (if you can't get to the bank or don't have your cards etc)... I think the novel demonstrates that well."
4. "It certainly does. **Fascinated by the book so far and intrigued by the emergence of some key humanitarian concepts - looking forward to seeing how these develop as the story unfolds. Keen in particular to see what conclusions can be drawn about finding solutions for IDPs in the context of extreme weather events. A shout out for the way the author amplifies real voices/experiences and for the descriptive language that made landfall ever more ominous...**"

RFA Member responses to the novel's engagement with education and children's issues:

1. "Hi all! I just wanted to drop this in the chat to spark up discussion about some things I'd love to talk a bit more about as they've been rattling around in my head. *** I'd love to talk about how the refugee children are denied admission to the county public schools because they technically aren't 'residents of the county' despite living in the camp nearby. I think the idea of residency and the right to education could make for a really interesting debate.** * I'd also love to touch on the

drug abuse and funneling drugs into the camp for profit and how that relates to humanitarian aid workers doing harm or prioritizing their own interests. This particular moral dilemma was unknown to me until I read this book so I'd love to dive into that. *** If you're like me and aren't so familiar with the rationale behind refugees having or being barred from having guns in camps, a conversation about the constitutional rights of refugees in camps and camp security would be great.** I'm so excited to hear your thoughts, and thank you!"

2. "The topic of **childhood trauma due to migration brings to mind the crisis at the US border with Mexico and how those children and families were treated.** @emilygarin Do you know of ways we can increase empathy around the harm that our government caused those children & families through the family separation policy?"

3. "This thread brings to mind a particularly jarring statistic that has always stuck in my mind: **nearly one in four children in the world live in countries affected by humanitarian crises. One in four! These children are often left without access to medical care, clean water and sanitation facilities, proper nutrition, quality education and protection.** Despite this, as Lucy pointed out, they are often incredibly resilient and are able to overcome significant challenges. Moreover, youth can play a critical role in their communities to respond to crisis and contribute to long-term peacebuilding in situations of conflict."

4. "Hi @emilygarin! **As someone who grew up watching Sesame Street, it's great to see all of the work that you all are doing! As many have already mentioned, Sesame has so much to offer in terms of highlighting and meeting the psychosocial needs of children in crisis.** I'm curious about how you think about the advocacy power Sesame has via its global reach to all children. **A big part of this book club is thinking about how media and storytelling can foster perspective-taking.** Has Sesame's content that's not explicitly being shown in crisis settings **undergone any changes related to advocating/raising awareness for children in crisis? What are some ways you think Sesame can foster skills like empathy-building and cultural awareness, even in communities where crisis may be unfamiliar,** in order to raise a more aware and involved next generation?"

5. "First of all, I do appreciate you writing this great book and joining the live chat today. I would love to share some questions:

1 - For children evacuated to a shelter after the disaster, what resources are currently available in terms of their education, psychological support, and safety? And how those are diverse to meet children's different cultural, religious, and social needs?

2 - When it's time for them to return to normalcy, **are families in the shelter they provided with housing vouchers?** If yes, I wonder whether the usage of vouchers is limited to a certain area (e.g., with high poverty, high crime, and low education quality). [...]

6. "I was quite struck by "identity" in this section of the book. **Climate change refugees, IDPs etc. These labels felt cold and distant and I was reminded to be more careful of how I use them in my studies and work. I'd be interested to know how these labels can impact children caught in crises in the longer term. The scene in the school has also stayed with me - how children in crisis can be denied opportunities for quality education and are short-changed even at a very early age.** Thanks again everyone for a really interesting discussion."

RFA member responses to the novel's engagement with climate-connected humanitarian and policy issues:

1. "I'm curious to hear more about the decision to center the story around an affluent family in Miami. I think it's really interesting that **dominant narratives about climate change discuss how low income or marginalized communities will experience the full force of climate change before the**

wealthy. At the same time though, there's this phenomenon that exists in many major cities where beach front or coastal real estate is the most desirable and expensive, leaving **wealthy peoples' homes and neighborhoods exposed to climate risks too. I appreciated that this book seems to push for climate urgency across socioeconomic demographics. Unexpected events can really happen to anyone and the climate crisis requires collective action.** Can you speak more to this decision?"

2. "Thank you, @avghaly for sharing the recording. And I do appreciate Professor Fisk sharing your great insights and thoughts on our questions. I would like to share some questions I've had in my mind since I read this book. For me who grew up in South Korea, **I didn't imagine that some of those crisis, deeply rooted in the story, were/are occurring in the United States.** It was even more striking in that the family whose life changed 360 degree due to the environmental disaster was white. It helped me realize my stereotypes and biases and how those have affected my approach to social equity in this society. I believe literature can have powerful influence on how people perceive culture, race, and social issue respectively and intertwiningly. **I wonder how literature can contribute to broadening people's perspectives on climate change issues and improving their sense of urgency and relatedness.** Developing countries' efforts to reduce carbon emissions and other environmental actions **have been viewed as not urgent reactions to their direct impacts on them, but as philanthropic actions for developed countries that are considered most vulnerable to climate change.** In addition to having characters with diverse race/ethnicity, nationality, and SES backgrounds, what other factors could contribute to that? Also, **in terms of social issues, how can literature enhance people's understanding of them in a right way/direction without causing biases/stereotypes?"**

3. "@avghaly It's a great question, and one reason I joined this group. What do I DO with the anxiety that books like this create? **What can any of us do? I am fatigued by solutions that focus on individual action** like recycling and paper straws. While important, **I am more interested in approaches that create broader systemic shifts - campaigns that put pressure on major corporations to divest from fossil fuels, pressure energy companies to pivot to renewables, put pressure on billionaires to address the policy failure that is extreme wealth, or create major and meaningful disruptions in daily life such that everyone is forced to pay attention and demand change.** The way I think individuals can really take part is through willingness to carry on despite sustained disruptions. I have a sneaky idea for this - **any climate campaign strategists out there?! Would love to run this wild idea by you...."**

Depth Engagement: online conversation about [Exit West](#)

Each paragraph is a separate response from an RFA reader.

RFA member responses to the novel's portrayal of conflict and war:

1. "Page 2 really got me - "...that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does." Feels so true to life, **whether from conflict or climate change, that we all just keep on doing all the things we always do until the absolute moment when we can't anymore. Such a humbling reality,** and maybe a takeaway for this book club itself, that we do often have the capacity to make changes in our lives to **prevent and prepare for disaster in ways we wouldn't have previously prioritized."**

2. "In a follow-up to my previous comment - **I can also see why (particularly in conflict situations) there might be a subconscious insistence on not changing one's ways. The way Nadia continues to stay at her apartment to maintain the last vestiges of her independence, which she is clearly intelligent enough to know is finite.** The way she still goes to the roof to smoke a joint even when artillery fire is audible nearby. Is it a defense mechanism, **the ways we cling to our own flavor of**

normalcy? The empathy Hamid has allowed us to feel for these characters' situations, when otherwise we might be outsiders who only feel judgment - I think this is one reason fiction is so powerful."

3. "A quote that struck me was from page 31, "In times of violence, there is always that first acquaintance or intimate of ours, who, when they are touched, makes what had seemed like a bad dream suddenly, evisceratingly real." I felt like this quote holds the truth that **we don't fully comprehend the reality of the situation until it reaches somewhere closer to ourselves**. It reminds me of how I felt in the middle of Covid and pre-vax; I wasn't overly concerned about it until I heard about family and other people I knew catching it and getting very sick. Until that point, I felt like it wouldn't impact me."

4. "A big (literal) tear jerker for me was Saeed's father's refusal to leave with them. This hit me in me two ways. As a parent, the hard truth that one day our children will be better off without us, especially in a crisis situation when we may actually encumber them and create more risk. And then an empathy for his strong desire to remain, despite the danger, where Saeed's mother was buried, where he had spent a life with her, "for the past offered more to him." **This called to mind the concept of "home," and how resistant people are to leaving when extreme weather events are likely or conflict is imminent**. The way Saeed "ran his fingertips over the apartment's furniture" before leaving—the things and places we see in our day-to-day lives, especially as children, become the backdrop for our identity. They're part of who we are."

5. "I found when reading *Exit West*, **I focused a lot on Hamid's ability juxtapose war-like elements and everyday life. He does so by placing ordinary people we may relate to or see realistically in a setting or plot** that may raise question on the environment around us. However, with his use of the omniscient narrator, the **reader is given a different perspective on different topics**, in this case love for this particular passage. This line really made me think about the interactions between Nadia and Saeed. What might it mean for their love in such a apocalyptic scenario? It's really interesting to ponder over."

6. "What struck me the most about this novel is the way in which Hamid plays around with location. He uses the magical doors to illustrate a geographical shift in which the characters jump around the world, however, the story remains the same. To me, it reads as though the precise location is not as crucial as this **shared narrative about war and how it affects people on a personal level**. Additionally, the precise location of where the story originates is never named despite every other location being identified. I believe **this makes the story even more profound because not only can it imply that this story could have started anywhere but also that it's a shared experience for many**. War and violence have no direct origin but they can be felt everywhere."

RFA member responses to the novel's portrayal of migration:

1. "Enjoyed the clip of **Mohsin Hamid's discussion on migration. Really thinking about how we create spaces/boundaries to protect what we believe to be historically ours**. Trapping ourselves in a mindset that is unnatural. **Contemplating how I have contributed to that way of thinking or behaving**."

2. "I think depends on how people integrate to new reality. If they become integrated, probably others will consider them "almost" like a native. "Almost " because in some places is hard to be completely. If not, they **can suffer a lot of discrimination** (from prejudice to hate) of several types (racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, behavioral etc). Even for who that get a good integration, sometimes rests some kind of **discrimination based on appearance**, mainly in large cities, where people are anonymous during large part of day. I think there is a lot of **myths and stereotypes regarding migrants, ones handling them as heroes or underdogs** (I don't know if the word is this in

English) and others handling them as terrorists or bums. **Few people in average of population think them as "people like us" , with "virtues and defects", with desires, plans, problems, frustrations, love, egoism etc, that has a lot to teach and a lot to learn, if they and we want and give opportunity.**

3. "I think the question of privilege you bring up is so interesting. My first thought was that **the privilege is in having the choice to decide for yourself - do I stay or go? This idea of choice seems very embedded even in how we legally describe human movement. "Migration" is a choice, fleeing as a "refugee" is involuntary (of course these terms also exclude IDPs). However, I worry that if we equate choice with privilege, we may sometimes erase the dignity and autonomy of those who, despite hard circumstances, are making their own choices.** For example, Nadia and Saeed choose to leave, while Saeed's father does not. So, **for me it is most helpful to think of privilege as the set of options you have to choose from. What are you free to choose?** This conception intersects interestingly with the magical doors in the book. While the doors give Nadia and Saeed more privilege in the form of greater geographical mobility, they do not change the fact that they may be unwelcome where they go. **Definitely makes me think about how much work needs to be done, beyond better border management, to expand the options and privileges afforded to people coming to a new place."**

4. "A few general thoughts-- **The impermanence of life, the fragility of it, and the actual lack of control over it even for those who think themselves in control runs through this book. Mohsin Hamid handles demonstrates the reality of impermanence by allowing it to permeate all temporal elements: people, places (rooms, countries), things (lemon trees, record players), etc.** @Fernando Barreto de Almeida reminded that humans share much in common (imperfections, hope, love) and Mohsin Hamid shows via the movement of people that our humanity in all its beauty and baggage becomes most evident when people are stripped of all control and have only themselves/society. ...We also can't control the ratio of good and bad elements that come through that same door into "our" place. **What's the best way to handle this without undoing a hopeful, helpful, hospitable arrival."**

Depth Engagement: online conversation about **How Beautiful We Were**

Each paragraph is a separate response from an RFA reader.

RFA member responses to the novel's portrayal of loss and damage:

1. "Yesterday I heard a quote on a podcast that made me think of How Beautiful We Were: "I think that the glorification of resilience, has to be something that was made up by people in power to keep people going in bad systems and call that a badge of honor... For myself, I don't feel proud of resilience, I feel proud of figuring out what's wrong and saying ok, I'm not going to do this." **Resilience is such a buzzword in development spaces and I think Thula is a fairly unique character in that she pushes so hard against romanticizing it, which can happen in books about exploitation, war, etc. However, it's tricky for me to dismiss the idea of celebrating resilience all together. In particular, I've read some feminists of color who critique white feminists for over-emphasizing western ideas of revolution, while under-appreciating more resilience-adjacent forms of feminist action.** I'm curious what people's interpretations of Thula's ideas of resilience vs. resistance are. Not to spoil anything, but I think this tension between the value of resilience (and maybe adaptation) vs. fighting back is really highlighted at the end of the book. Excited to hear from Aida today!"

2. "Question for the Panel: Was the purpose of Austin and Thula's relationship in the novel to highlight the contrasting ideas toward progress in the environmental justice arena? More specifically, were their conversations noted in Thula's letters sent back to Kosawa meant to show the different approaches to progress: **work within the preexisting system versus completely transforming it via revolutionary efforts?**"

3. "Question for the Panel: How can we **reconcile the tensions between economic development and environmental sustainability, particularly in the context of developing nations where the desire for economic growth is often prioritized over environmental concerns? And what role can reparations play in addressing these tensions?**"

annex

Actions Examples from RFA on Our Online Discussion Platform

Action Examples from RFA Administrators:

[The UN's Environment Program: Climate Action](#)

[National Volunteer Opportunities for Disasters: Hurricane Ian](#)

[Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\): Change to Advocacy](#)

[Doctors Without Borders - Volunteer Opportunity](#)

[Survival International](#)

[Beyond Aid Podcast](#)

[Rethinking Humanitarianism Podcast](#)

[Stories and Humanitarian Action Podcast](#)

[Needs List](#)

[Horn of Africa Data Explorer](#)

[The International Organization for Migration \(IOM\): Somalia](#)

[Vox: The disastrous redesign of Pakistan's rivers](#)

[IFRC Statement Regarding Turkey/Syria](#)

[Request for Donations Regarding Turkey/Syria](#)

[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: UN Donation Request](#)

[Read For Action Mapathon](#)

[The Loss & Damage Collaboration](#)

[Bloomberg Originals](#)

[Perry World House: Reconsidering Reparations with Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò](#)

[COP28](#)

[Start Network](#)

[Sesame Workshop](#)

Action Examples from RFA Readers:

[United Nations World Food Programme: Free Rice](#)

[Amir Nasr-Azadani Petition](#)

[Anti-Slavery International](#)

[The Swimmers, Sarah Mardini Petition](#)

[Information Regarding Sarah Mardini](#)

[United Nation Volunteers Program](#)

[Research Support for an Automated Analysis of Sustainable Development Goals](#)

[Volunteer Match: Volunteer Opportunity](#)

[Translators without Borders: Volunteer Opportunity](#)
[Be My Eyes: Volunteer Opportunity](#)
[Spanish Language Volunteering](#)
[Brazilian Volunteering](#)
[Zero Waste International Alliance](#)
[Human Rights Watch: World Report 2023](#)
[Human Health Alliance](#)
[Article from UNESCO Regarding Attacks on Journalists](#)
[Girl Effect](#)
[UNICEF shares learners' wishes on International Day of Education](#)
[Article Regarding Yanomami Genocide](#)
[Interview with Mark Lowcock, former head of UN Humanitarian Coordination](#)
[Indigenous Women's March](#)
[RFI: Climate tipping points in Amazon, Tibet 'linked': scientists](#)
[Anti-Slavery International in Action 2022 Video](#)
[Walk Free](#)
[CLEAR Global](#)
[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: Hot Task Manager](#)
[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: AFAD \(the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority\)](#)
[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: AKUT](#)
[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: White Helmets \(Syria\)](#)
[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: Dina Akylbekova, UNDP](#)
[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: Doctors Without Borders](#)
[Introduction to Humanitarian Translation for the Translators Without Borders Community](#)
[Turkey/Syria Earthquake: Qatar donates World Cup mobile homes to earthquake survivors](#)
[Anti-Slavery International Petition](#)
[The Climate Initiative](#)
[Socioambiental Organization](#)
[The Fun Bio Organization](#)
[We Are Biomas](#)
[Eco An Peru](#)
[Cameroon Ecology](#)
[Wocan](#)
[JR Biotek Foundation](#)
[Arcenciel](#)
[AAranyak](#)
[The Economics of Biodiversity](#)
[Article Regarding UK's Illegal Migration Bill \(Anti-Slavery International\)](#)
[SDSN Youth](#)

[Translators Without Borders Conversation on Gender and Race](#)

[The International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade](#)

[Campaign of Anti Slavery International and NForce](#)

[IRS and Millionaire Taxes](#)

[Workplace for Good by Meta](#)

[Human Rights Watch: Tanzania's Eviction of Maasai Pastoralists Continues](#)

[Global Report on Food Crises](#)

[We Make Change - Volunteer Opportunity](#)

[Brazil says UN confirmed Amazonian city of Belem as COP30 host](#)

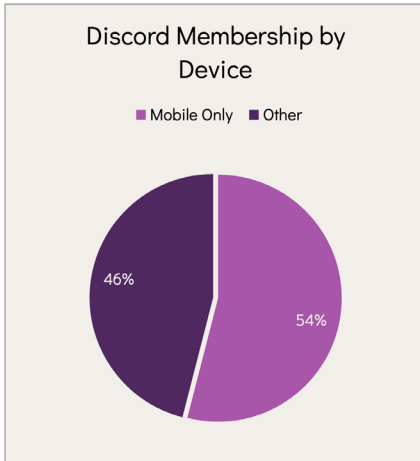
[UN agencies warn of rising hunger risk in 18 'hotspots'](#)

[Peru lawmakers propose bill to strip Indigenous people of protections](#)

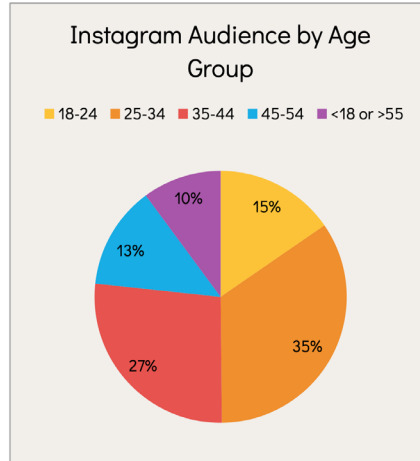
annex

Social Media Analytics Collected from October 2022 through April 2023*

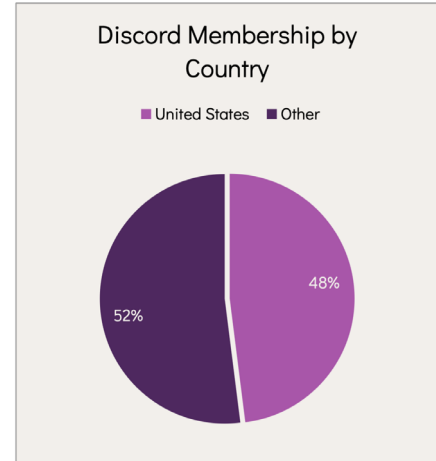
* Analytics and graphics developed by Noah Strike, MPP



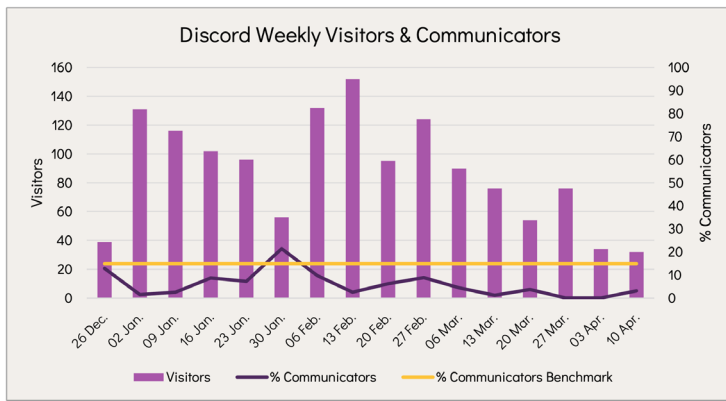
Of the 1150 Discord users, 54 percent accessed the community using only their mobile device. The other 46 percent of users used a mix of devices – likely a personal computer in combination with a mobile device.



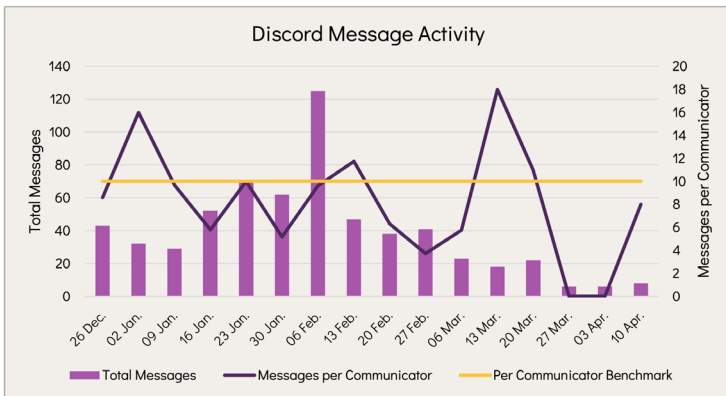
Age demographic data is only available from Instagram. RFA's Instagram audience skews about 10 to 15 percentage points older than the platform's overall user base. Young adults (18-34) make up about 60 percent of all Instagram users but were 50 percent of RFA's followers. Inversely, middle-aged adults (35-54) make up only 25 percent of all Instagram users but were 40 percent of RFA's followers.



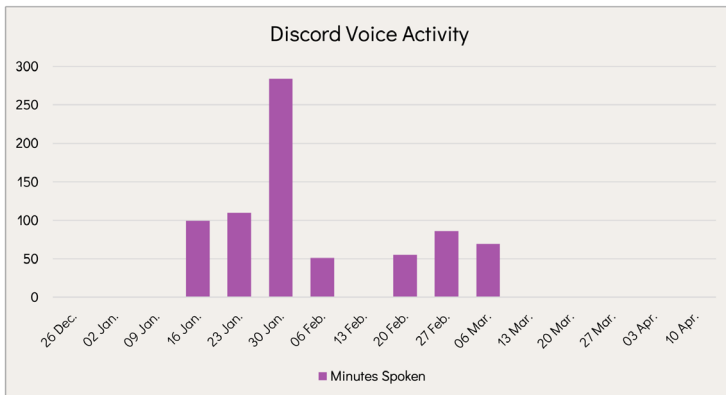
RFA's Discord community reflects the global reach of its content; 52 percent of its roughly 1150 members (as of 13 April 2023) registered their accounts from outside of the United States. We are unable to determine from which countries these users registered from as Discord's privacy protocol groups countries into 'Other' unless 50 unique members have listed the same country.



RFA had a very strong number of weekly visitors, averaging about 87 per week and peaking at 152 the week of 13 February.



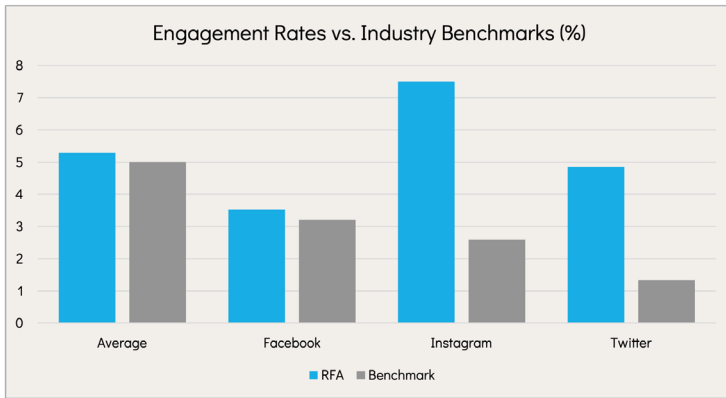
RFA's Discord community averaged 38 messages per week, peaking at 120 messages during the week of 06 February. While Communicators occasionally reached Discord's benchmark of 10 messages per week per Communicator – recommended for a self-sustaining community, this is a growth opportunity for RFA.



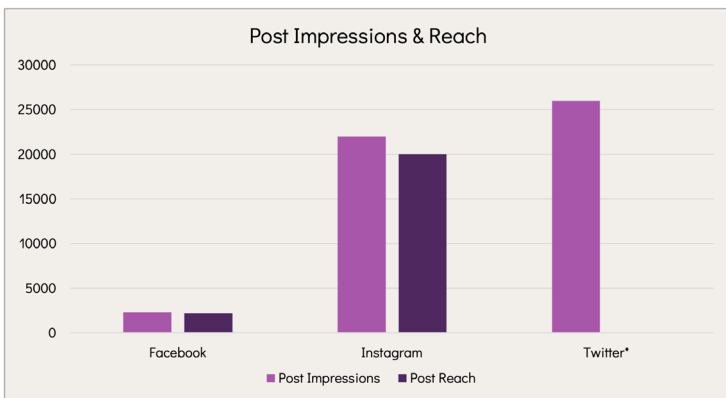
RFA members spoke with one another and special guests via live chats about 750 minutes over the course of the analytic period. Weeks with no voice activity recorded correspond with weeks where no live chat was hosted.



RFA had about 960 Discord members when the platform started tracking data. Our initial goal of 200 members was reached within six weeks. In the following months, membership steadily grew – even during the winter ‘break’ period of reduced content – before leveling off around 1150 as the last reading period concluded. The large jump around 13 February corresponds to major third-party publicity – namely via Bookshop and OCHA's newsletters – and the smaller jump around 13 March corresponds to the final live author panel.



Social media users engaged with RFA's content above, and in some cases well above, industry averages. The high-end industry benchmark for an Instagram engagement rate is about 2.5 percent; RFA's followers engaged with its content at a 7.5 percent rate. This means that while we would expect about 2-3 out of every 100 followers to like/comment/share a post, RFA's Instagram account actually saw about 7-8 out of every 100 followers engage in this way. This tripled engagement suggests that RFA is achieving its goal in filling a gap in the humanitarian space.



RFA's Facebook had by far the smallest number of post impressions and shortest post reach. About 2500 unique users viewed RFA's content on Facebook, and the nearly 1:1 ratio of impressions to reach implies few users viewed content multiple times. RFA's Instagram had a significant number of impressions and wide reach. RFA's content on Instagram was viewed about 22,000 times by 20,000 unique users during the analytic period. The slight difference between impressions and reach implies some users viewed content multiple times, though this could be incidental. Twitter only provides data on post impressions. RFA's content on Twitter was viewed about 26,000 times during the analytic period, though we are unable to discern if these were unique or repeat users.

*It is important to note that Facebook and Facebook users were not RFA's core target demographic, which could lead to its underperformance.



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