

Legible but not recognised. What humanitarian agencies and governments owe to those who refuse biometric registration

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Abstract

Humanitarian agencies and governments make biometric registration a condition of assistance or legal status, which research analyses as a problem of consent, since those who depend on it cannot refuse. This article contests the premise that a refusal ends communication between a person and the agency or government, and asks what it owes that person. Critical discourse analysis of documents from Bangladesh, South Africa, Gaza, Malaysia and Mizoram, India shows that those who set the condition name no one who could refuse it, even where they speak of consent. Where they withdraw assistance, they present the loss, through responsibilisation, as the consequence of refusal rather than of their policy. Some who refuse ask to be identified under their own name, making refusal a claim to recognition rather than an exit. Both concern who sets the terms, and the argument advances a distinction between legibility, identifiability on terms an agency or government sets, and recognisability, the standing to accept or refuse them. Drawing on Kantian ethics and decolonial critiques of recognition, the article extends the ethics of humanitarian communication to those who refuse. Whoever imposes the condition owes anyone who refuses an alternative to being read and a reasoned answer.

Keywords. biometric registration, communication ethics, critical discourse analysis, humanitarian communication, recognition, refusal

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1. Introduction

In UNHCR's guidance, the registration interview is "the principal means through which UNHCR is able to know its populations of concern", and "biometric data are collected" so that registered identities "are globally unique" (UNHCR, n.d., section 5.2). Humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR have made biometric registration a condition of assistance, so that "visibility and consent to being a data subject have become requirements" for refugees who seek it (Sandvik, 2023, p. 69). Research on humanitarian technology frequently analyses this condition as a problem of consent, noting for example that the iris recognition of returning Afghans was "not voluntary" (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 85). These studies treat a refusal as an exit from assistance rather than as communication with the agency, since anyone who wishes to avoid registration has no "viable opt-out" apart from giving up assistance (Sandvik, 2023, p. 26). This article contests that premise with a case from 2025, in which about 400 Rohingya families in Bangladesh "lost access to their food rations" after declining to update their biometric data with UNHCR (Burt, 2025, paras. 1, 6). UNHCR nevertheless stated that it had reviewed their objections and communicated the outcome to each of them (Burt, 2025, paras. 7, 14), so that the refusal did not end the communication between the agency and those who refused.

Rather than asking whether refusal is possible when assistance depends on registration, the analysis shifts focus to the answer that such a refusal receives. Biometric registration can be treated as communication between those who register and those who are registered, and in Bangladesh UNHCR was accused of "communication failures" in informing the refugees about the exercise (Burt, 2025, para. 8). Consent requires that a person be able to agree or decline, whereas through registration an agency obtains what Sandvik

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calls “the legible body” (2023, p. 16) without any statement from that person. Agencies and governments nevertheless address the persons they register in notices and public statements, in which they answer a refusal as a claim or record it as non-compliance, when they answer it at all.

Humanitarian communication research, to which the article contributes, has mainly examined how the media and agencies address Western publics about “distant others” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 3). In its ethical guidelines, Bond, the UK network of international development organisations, affirms “an individual’s right to refuse to be photographed” with “no negative consequences” (2024, pp. 10, 21), a right without counterpart in notices that require biometric registration. At Europe’s borders, this research has found that the international organisations and NGOs of “securitized care” communicated through “unidirectional, top-down channels” and “fully silenced the migrants” (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017, pp. 160, 172). Research in communication ethics has stated what those who address others owe them, such as “hospitality” towards strangers (Silverstone, 2007, p. 136) and respect for their “voice” (Couldry, 2010, p. 1).

A significant gap remains, however, since no study analyses the discourses that agencies and governments address to persons who refuse to be registered for assistance. For Madianou, the Rohingya strike of 2018 exemplified “refugee agency” against power asymmetries that are “too steep to overcome” (2019, p. 10). In her later work she classes the strike as “overt resistance” and holds that in camps non-participation in biometric infrastructures “is not an option” (2025, pp. 154, 170). In both works she analyses refusal as resistance to power rather than as communication with the agencies and governments that register. Studies of digital identity pair “recognition and surveillance” (Sandvik, 2023, p. 21) and treat identification as a source of recognition, because “identification can confer important rights and protections” (Weitzberg et al., 2021, p. 3), without asking whether being

legible amounts to being recognised. The obligations of hospitality and voice have not yet been applied to the agencies that register those who depend on assistance.

The focus on refusal is timely because humanitarian organisations now disagree on whether assistance may depend on biometric data. Since 2019 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has undertaken not to make such data “a mandatory condition of service provision” and to serve those who object “without processing their biometric data” (ICRC, 2019, pp. 8, 15). UNHCR, by contrast, kept the condition in Bangladesh, where registrations that were not re-verified were “considered inactive” (Burt, 2025, para. 6). In Ukraine, however, “many agencies have dropped the requirement to collect biometric data” after international NGOs refused to do so and the government opposed such collection (Wille, 2023, paras. 5, 9 to 10). The refusal to collect biometric data that was accepted in Ukraine came from international NGOs and a government, whereas the refusal to provide them that UNHCR rejected in Bangladesh came from the refugees themselves. The difference suggests that whether a refusal is accepted depends on the standing of those who refuse, and standing is a question of recognition rather than of consent.

This article argues that an agency or government which makes assistance conditional on biometric registration wrongs a person who refuses whenever it withholds an alternative to being read or a reasoned answer to the refusal. The wrong lies in the answer to the refusal rather than in the data collected, so that it would persist even if the biometric system were secure, and the argument belongs to communication ethics. The analysis reveals that those who set the condition name no one who could refuse it, even where they speak of consent, and that some who refuse ask to be identified under their own name. The first research question asks how agencies and governments justify the condition of biometric registration and answer those who refuse it (RQ1), which the analysis examines through responsibilisation (van Houdt and Schinkel, 2014, pp. 60 to 61). The second asks how an

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agency or government ought to answer a person who refuses biometric registration, and whether the agencies and governments in the five settings examined answer in this way (RQ2). Visibility and legibility are the concepts applied to the refusal, and the answers in the texts are measured against the criterion of recognition.

The primary theoretical contribution of this article is to extend the ethics of humanitarian communication to the answer owed to those who refuse, through a distinction between legibility and recognisability. Recognisability, as defined here, requires that whoever can read a person also grant that person the standing to accept or refuse the terms of that reading. With this distinction, the article introduces a theory of recognition to the study of humanitarian data, in which recognisability is distinct from consent, and to humanitarian communication, in which it is distinct from visibility. The criterion is derived from Kantian ethics, in which treating others as persons requires “the possibility either of consenting to or of dissenting from what is proposed” (O’Neill, 1989, p. 110). It is also derived from Coulthard’s reading of Fanon, in which “the terms of accommodation usually end up being determined by and in the interests of the hegemonic partner” (2014, p. 17).

Through critical discourse analysis, the article treats UNHCR’s discourse on registration and identity management as a nodal discourse (Fairclough, 2010, p. 507), which is articulated most fully in Bangladesh. It then examines how the condition is set and contested in four cases, in South Africa, Gaza, Malaysia and Mizoram, India, where biometric registration conditions assistance or legal status. Bangladesh and the four cases form the five settings of the analysis, whose corpus consists of 83 documents dated from 2023 to 2026, of which 21 core texts are analysed in detail. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, and section 3 describes the corpus and its analysis. The findings for each research question follow in section 4, and section 5 relates them to the literature reviewed above. The conclusion states the contributions and the limits of the study.

2. Theoretical framework: legibility and the standing to refuse

Biometric registration is conventionally understood as a technical procedure through which agencies identify those who receive assistance, and UNHCR introduced it “to combat low-level fraud” (Madianou, 2019, p. 5). In UNHCR’s guidance, “biometric enrolment and photographs anchor a registration record to a physical individual”, and “biometric identification” then ensures “the continued unique identification” of that individual (UNHCR, n.d., section 5.2). The article uses biometric registration for both steps, since agencies and governments make either the enrolment of a person or that person’s later identification a condition of assistance. The same research holds that consent “does not carry any meaning” once biometric registration becomes the condition of assistance (Madianou, 2025, p. 77). The ICRC also treats consent as invalid without a “real choice to refuse Consent”, as when there is “a lack of alternative to the specific assistance being offered” (Marelli, 2024, pp. 45 to 46).

Yet, treating biometric registration solely as a problem of consent risks overlooking what an agency or government owes once a person has refused. In moral theory, a dilemma arises when “the agent is required to do each of two (or more) actions” but “cannot do both (or all) of the actions” (McConnell, 2022, section 2). A person who must choose between being read and receiving assistance faces a dilemma of this kind, which the article calls the consent dilemma. It is “imposed on the agent by the world (or other agents)” rather than caused by “the agent’s own wrongdoing” (McConnell, 2022, section 7). Since the person who refuses did not create this consent dilemma, the agency or government that imposed it owes that person an answer.

To theorise what is owed, this article draws on the theory of recognition, since the Rohingya refugees who went on strike in 2018 asked to be recorded under their own name. They objected that the new identity cards “erased their ethnicity” (Madianou, 2019, p. 9), and so claimed recognition rather than privacy. In Fraser’s status model, misrecognition arises

“when institutions structure interaction according to cultural norms that impede parity of participation” (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 29). In Butler’s account, “apprehension” is “a mode of knowing that is not yet recognition”, which can imply “registering” a life “without full cognition” (2009, pp. 5 to 6). For Alloa, a person is always recognised “as something” (2023, p. 327), so that an agency that records a name on an identity card also records what it recognises the holder as.

However, drawing on the theory of recognition involves a theoretical risk, since the politics of recognition “in its contemporary liberal form” can reproduce colonial state power (Coulthard, 2014, p. 3). For Coulthard, Indigenous peoples who claim “rights to land and self-government” should “redirect” their struggles away from a politics that seeks “a conciliatory form of settler-state recognition” (2014, p. 24). The article adopts the critique’s account of who determines the terms of recognition (Coulthard, 2014, p. 17), without describing biometric registration as a form of settler colonialism, which would use decolonisation as a metaphor (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Those who depend on assistance cannot “turn away” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 48) from the agencies and governments that register them without losing that assistance, so that the question becomes what they are owed. The critics consulted here also retain universal norms and contest who may state them (Dussel, 2013; Mutua, 2001), and Rohingya interviewees describe consent with their own word, *ejajot* (Hossain et al., 2024). The article therefore treats the decolonial critique as the strongest objection to the theory of recognition rather than as a separate framework, since those affected claim consent and recognition as norms of their own.

From this objection and from Kantian ethics the article draws its criterion of recognition, which distinguishes a person who is recognised from a person who is merely legible. An agency or government makes a person legible when it can identify that person on terms it has set, and recognisable only when it also grants the standing to accept or refuse

those terms. In Kantian ethics, agencies and governments owe this standing to vulnerable populations, since “the weak risk too much by dissenting unless institutions are structured to secure the option of refusal” (O’Neill, 1989, p. 218). In Fraser’s terms, a person who cannot refuse registration cannot participate “as a peer” (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 29), so that the standing to refuse becomes a condition of parity of participation.

The term recognisability, as the article uses it, differs from Butler’s use and corresponds to a distinction drawn in research on promotional cultures. For Butler, “recognizability” denotes “the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition”, and Butler asks how to “shift the very terms of recognizability” (2009, pp. 5 to 6). By specifying one such condition, the standing to accept or refuse the terms on which one is read, the article gives recognisability a narrower meaning than Butler’s. Research on promotional cultures distinguishes political recognition, which “acknowledges claims in their structural and collective dimension”, from regulatory recognition, which “extends legitimacy only to claims aligned with” the logic of the regime that confers it (Author, 2026, p. 1). The standing to accept or refuse the terms of one’s registration corresponds to this difference.

To apply the criterion, the analysis pairs the concepts of the framework in two dimensions, which correspond to the two research questions (Figure 1). In the first, the analysis examines through responsibilisation how agencies and governments justify the condition of biometric registration and answer those who refuse it (RQ1). In the second, it examines how an agency or government ought to answer a person who refuses biometric registration, applying visibility and legibility to the refusal and the criterion of recognition to the answer (RQ2). The analysis thus considers the same refusal twice, as the rejection of a demand and as a claim that may receive an answer.

[Figure 1 near here]

First dimension: the legibility of the body and responsabilisation

The first dimension concerns legibility, a term from Scott’s study of the modern state that research on humanitarian technology applies to assistance and describes as “coercive abstraction” (Scott, 1998; Sandvik, 2023, p. 27). Through biometric registration, an agency makes the body itself legible (Sandvik, 2023, p. 16), so that it can identify a person through fingerprints or iris scans without the person saying or claiming anything. Research on the branding and measurement of enslaved persons shows that such legibility is a political relation as well as a technical one (Browne, 2015). Those who make the legibility of the body a condition of assistance therefore impose the dilemma described above on every person who depends on that assistance.

An agency or government that imposes this dilemma can answer a refusal either with responsabilisation or with recognition, and the analysis examines the former under the first dimension. Research on governmentality uses the term responsabilisation for the process through which agencies and governments make individuals and communities responsible for “public tasks” (van Houdt and Schinkel, 2014, pp. 60 to 61). Research on health communication identifies a related practice, “blaming the victim”, in which campaign designers locate the causes of a social problem in the person who suffers from it (Guttman and Ressler, 2001, p. 122). Those who keep the condition can justify registration as necessary and describe refusal as non-compliance, and so make the person who refuses responsible for the loss of assistance.

Second dimension: the visibility and legibility of refusal

While the first dimension concerns the demand, the second concerns whether a refusal can receive an answer as a claim. For Alloa, recognition presupposes “a form of social visibility”, although visibility also exposes persons to surveillance (2023, pp. 327, 335). A refusal can therefore receive an answer only if it appears to the agency or government that registers the

person and takes a form that its officials can read. In this way, visibility and legibility become conditions of recognition for the person who refuses, whereas the legibility of the body requires no act of that person.

Recognisability has a negative form in the “right to invisibility”, for which there are growing calls under regimes of advanced surveillance and automated profiling (Alloa, 2023, p. 331). In this article, the right means the standing not to be read on terms one has not accepted, and the positive form of recognisability is the standing to be read on terms one has accepted. This meaning differs from the decolonial sense of invisibility, in which “the logic of the in-visible is the history of destitution” (Mignolo, 2020, p. 215). A person who claims this right must nevertheless meet the conditions of visibility and legibility, if the refusal is to receive an answer as a claim. In Alloa’s terms, a person who refuses in this way would combine the “passive resistance” that evades categorisation with the “active resistance” that demands visible recognition (2023, p. 335). Such a refusal would then be a request for recognition on terms that the person can accept, which is the claim to which the criterion requires an answer.

3. Methodology

The present study uses critical discourse analysis to examine disputes over biometric registration as a condition of assistance or legal status, in documents from May 2023 to October 2026. The corpus begins with a notice of the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR making biometric enrolment a condition of assistance and ends with reports on Myanmar nationals in Malaysia who feared forced return. Biometric conditions of assistance predate this period, since in 2002 UNHCR made “assistance packages” for Afghans returning from Pakistan depend on iris recognition (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 59). Disputes also predate it, as in Yemen in 2019, when Houthi leaders “opposed the use of biometric data in aid delivery” (Madianou, 2025, p. 74).

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The design of the study is based on Fairclough’s concept of “nodal” discourses, which “subsume and articulate in a particular way a great many other discourses” (2010, p. 507). I treat UNHCR’s discourse on registration and identity management as the node of these disputes, a node articulated most fully in Bangladesh. Section 5.2 of UNHCR’s *Guidance on Registration and Identity Management* (UNHCR, n.d.) is the text of the node. Research on recontextualisation “entails comparing texts in different social fields and at different social scales” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 509), so I chose cases that differ in field and in scale. Two concern assistance, in South Africa and Gaza, and two the registration of refugees by the state, in Malaysia and Mizoram (Table 1). With Bangladesh, these four cases form the five settings of the analysis.

These cases were selected by purposive sampling through a search with an AI assistant, since I know of no list of disputes from which to draw a representative sample. Disputes were only included if they met four criteria, namely a biometric condition of assistance or legal status, a recorded refusal or contestation, an official response, and little academic work. I included registration by the state because UNHCR provides for registration that “the host government leads” (UNHCR, n.d., section 5.2). To meet the fourth criterion, I limited the search to the five years before October 2026, because research has examined earlier disputes. Ukraine, where international NGOs refused to collect biometric data in 2023 (Wille, 2023), was not examined, since the agencies no longer required it.

Data for the four cases and the node were collected between 1 and 3 October 2026 using the same assistant, Claude (Anthropic; Opus 5.5 and Fable 5.1). It searched the web and saved documents under my direction, and its four search agents reported candidate texts without saving files. I approved each file before it was saved, and every quotation from the agents was checked against a saved copy. Of the 83 documents, I selected 21 as a core corpus, designed to hold one text for each of five positions in each case (Table 1) and four for

the node. For three positions in Mizoram no text was found, and the other 62 documents form a context corpus for tracing chains of texts, checking facts and quoting those subject to the condition. One text for each position suffices, since the article asks what is owed in answer to a refusal rather than how often refusal occurs, and the texts that set the condition are its official statements.

The core texts were analysed using Fairclough's "three-dimensional method of discourse analysis" (2010, p. 132), and at the level of text I annotated 247 spans in 79 excerpts with ten categories. The unit of analysis is the excerpt, and a span was assigned to a category when it answered that category's question in Table 3. The assistant proposed the excerpts and a first annotation of each, which I reviewed against the source text. Every excerpt was found word for word in its saved copy by a script, and a speaker of Malay checked the assistant's translations of the two Malay core texts.

Following the textual analysis, I examined discourse practice, identifying the discourses of each document by its "themes" and "perspective" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 129) and their "particular mix" (p. 218). Since intertextuality is "a matter of recontextualization" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 51), I traced how the wording of the node was transformed in Bangladesh and compared the texts of the four cases with it. At the level of social practice, I treated a representation as ideological when it could be shown to contribute to maintaining "social relations of power" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9). For RQ1, I asked whether requiring biometric registration as a "necessary means" would have "negative consequences" that "undermine the stated goal" or "other agents' goals" (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, pp. 63 to 64). For RQ2, I applied the criterion of recognition derived in section 2 to each answer to refusal.

To operationalise the general question, what an agency or government owes to a person who refuses to be read, I divided it into two research questions and seven sub-

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questions (Table 2). Each sub-question corresponds to a concept of section 2 and to the textual categories through which I answered it. I fixed the ten categories in advance but recorded sub-labels as they occurred, since categories are “always provisional and open to change” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 15). I also assessed what Saunders et al. call “a priori thematic saturation” (2018, p. 1896), and each category occurs in every case except Mizoram.

My position shapes these choices, since I made them as a scholar of communication ethics in London. I apply a theory from European philosophy to decisions affecting vulnerable populations in Asia and Africa, whom I know only through texts written mostly by intermediaries. In writing about them I risk speaking for them, a problem that a “retreat” into speaking only for oneself does not solve (Alcoff, 1991, pp. 17 to 22). I address it by treating the texts in which they speak as a position of their own and by stating my criterion for readers to contest. The assistant is a further intermediary, since it found only texts in English or Malay that search engines index.

Given these limits, I rely on transparency to establish validity, and every claim in the findings cites a document by its identifier. The study’s GitHub repository holds the record and SHA-256 hash of every document and the prompts and scripts used to build the corpus (<https://anonymous.4open.science/r/corpus-review-7390/>). Its interactive page presents the corpus with the textual analysis and resolves each document identifier cited in section 4 (<https://anonymous.4open.science/w/corpus-review-7390/>). The texts are withheld because most are under copyright, whereas anyone with a copy of the archive can check each file against its hash.

4. Findings: the consent dilemma and the requirement of recognition

Justification and responsabilisation

To answer the first research question, the findings reveal that agencies and governments justify biometric registration as a protection, yet in two settings withdraw from those who

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3 refuse the assistance it is meant to protect. UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh
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5 present the condition as a protection for refugees, and SASSA as a protection of grants
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7 against fraud (Figure 2; Table S1). Both present the loss of assistance as the consequence of
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9 the refusal rather than of their own policy, so that the person who refuses appears responsible
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11 for it. Through this responsabilisation, they transfer to those who receive assistance the
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13 verification of identity, which UNHCR and SASSA must provide to those who fund
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15 assistance.
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19 *[Figure 2 near here]*
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21 *Justifying the condition*

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23 At the level of text, the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR legitimate the condition by
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25 rationalisation, writing that establishing identities “is key to ensuring protection and solutions
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27 for refugees” (UNHCR_005). This practical argument for biometric registration as a
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29 “necessary means” (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, pp. 63 to 64) is rebutted in Bangladesh.
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31 The Rohingya families who refused were “cut off from food aid” and so lost the assistance
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33 that the condition is meant to protect (Diplomat_002). The most surprising aspect of these
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35 texts is UNHCR’s statement that “no specific protection risks were identified” from
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37 suspending distributions (Diplomat_002). Funders are a further reason for the condition,
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39 since UNHCR is reported to cite “donor confidence” and the National Treasury made
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41 SASSA’s budget “conditional” on better “biometric and income verification processes”
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47 (Diplomat_002; OpenSecrets_001).
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49 Those who set the condition also share with some who dispute it the assumption that
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51 assistance may be taken by persons not entitled to it, and differ over who should verify
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53 identity. SASSA introduced enrolment “to ensure every grant recipient is verifiably
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55 authentic”, and the Israeli representative takes as given “ Hamas’ continued looting of
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57 humanitarian resources” (SAnews_001; IsraelUN_001). In Gaza, UNICEF objected to facial
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3 recognition as a “precondition”, yet a week later the Emergency Relief Coordinator offered
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5 “verification measures” against theft by Hamas, in a letter annexed to Israel’s
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7 (UNGeneva_001; IsraelUN_001). Asked how the distribution verified recipients, the United
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9 States Ambassador answered that “there is a screening that is done” (USEmbassy_001). In
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11 Malaysia, the question is who registers refugees, since the government registers detainees
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13 under its own programme and has instructed UNHCR to stop (MOHA_001; Hansard_001).
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17 *Answering those who refuse*
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19 As shown in Figure 2, UNHCR states a right to refuse only in its guidance, the text of the
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21 node (UNHCR_001). At the level of discourse practice, UNHCR combines in this guidance
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23 two divergent discourses, one of rights and consent and one of identity management. In the
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25 first, UNHCR represents the person as holder of “the right to refuse”, and in the second it
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27 presents biometrics as “the preferred methodology” for verifying identity. UNHCR limits this
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29 right, since “the related right to object” appears in brackets in a footnote, where it “may be
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31 determined according to government policy, not UNHCR policy”. A host government that
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33 leads registration, as in Malaysia, can therefore withdraw the right (MOHA_001). In
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35 Bangladesh, where the Government conducts the exercise jointly with UNHCR, registration
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37 is “a pre-requisite for the GoB’s protection and assistance” and no right to refuse is stated
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39 (UNHCR_005; UNHCR_006).
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44 In the texts in which they set the condition, by contrast, agencies and governments
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46 name no person who could refuse it. In their notice of 2023, the Government of Bangladesh
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48 and UNHCR recontextualise the guidance by turning “participation in registration is
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50 voluntary” into “Participation in the exercise is required” (UNHCR_001; UNHCR_005).
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52 They keep the nominalisation and choose the highest of the “degrees of commitment” to
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54 obligation in deontic modality (Fairclough, 2003, p. 170). In South Africa, the Minister
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56 makes the applicant the grammatical subject of “consents”, although the consent is given “By
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virtue of application” (SRDRegs_001). In the eight texts in which agencies and governments set or support the condition (Table 1), the word consent occurs only in these regulations. In Gaza, those who run the distribution deny a condition that others report, as an official is reported to do in Mizoram, so that a refusal would have no one to address (GHF_002; Reuters_001; TheWire_001).

Where they withdraw assistance, agencies and governments connect refusal to the loss by a semantic relation of condition or consequence, and leave themselves unnamed or present themselves as unable to act. In the sentence of the notice that states the loss, “Persons who fail to show up will be inactivated”, persons act only by failing and the passive verb has no agent (UNHCR_005). In the questions and answers of 2026, “refusing the processing of personal data” has no person, and the nominalisations “deregistration” and “the discontinuation of protection and assistance” have no agent (UNHCR_006). In South Africa, grants “will remain suspended” for those who do not complete the verification, and a SASSA manager said that “if you don’t consent, we can’t assess you”, presenting SASSA’s decision as an inability (GroundUp_002; OpenSecrets_001). At the level of social practice, this representation is ideological, since, in assigning the loss to the person who refuses, its authors contribute to maintaining “social relations of power” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9). The High Court of South Africa, however, found it “absurd for the respondents to place a duty on the applicants” to update government databases (Judgment_001, para. 124).

Recognition and refusal

To answer the second research question, the findings show that no agency or government in the five settings answers a person who refuses with an alternative to being read. Where a refusal is reported, those who refused lost food assistance in Bangladesh, and those who refuse are threatened with detention in Mizoram, as refugees report (Figure 2; Table S2). Recognition would require such an alternative, because a person who loses assistance by

refusing has no standing to refuse the terms of registration. An answer of this kind also requires that the person who refuses be visible to those who register, and that the refusal take a form that they can read.

The visibility of those who refuse

Officials make vulnerable populations visible as classes of persons and as data rather than as persons who may refuse. As social actors they are classified in the notice as “all eligible persons”, and in the wording of SASSA’s announcement an applicant is “the client” (UNHCR_005; SAnews_001). In Malaysia, a deputy minister spoke of refugees “yang tidak mempunyai identiti” (who have no identity), and the Ministry of Home Affairs reports that detainees “telah didatakan” (have been entered as data) (Hansard_001; MOHA_001). Some officials in India are reported as saying that it is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and that “refugees therefore have no right to ask for consent” (TheWire_001). Officials thus make identity and rights depend on what states grant, so that a person to whom no state grants them has no standing to refuse.

The persons so classified are quoted only in news reports, and those who set or support the condition name its refusal once in their eight texts (UNHCR_006). In these reports, some speak of fear, as when a camp resident in Mizoram said that “we are afraid to refuse the mandate”, so that refusal is the object of fear rather than an act (TheWire_001). Others left, such as the families who “moved out of the camp after refusing to enrol”, a form of passive resistance in Alloa’s sense (TheWire_001; Alloa, 2023, p. 335). In Bangladesh, two Rohingya representatives engaged in active resistance in Alloa’s sense (2023, p. 335) and stated the community’s “minimum terms” in the imperative, “Put it in writing”, so that “consent is real, not forced” (Diplomat_001). The terms require that refugees be told “in Rohingya or Bangla” what data are taken and that the word Rohingya be restored “on every

document” (Diplomat_001). Here a person subject to the condition is the source of an obligation and uses the vocabulary of consent to claim the standing that recognition requires.

The legibility of refusal

At the level of discourse practice, however, the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR, who require the legibility of the body, provide a form for complaints and none for a refusal. In the genre of questions and answers, they write the questions as well as the answers and invite “concerns/complaints” (UNHCR_006). In its guidance, UNHCR provides for “alternative methods” when a person refuses “on legitimate grounds”, whereas in the notice “alternative arrangements” are for anyone “who cannot come to the site” (UNHCR_001; UNHCR_005). After the families’ sit-in, UNHCR confirmed the suspension in a letter in which it reportedly stated that “no humanitarian assistance could be provided to those not biometrically registered” (Diplomat_002). UNHCR also encouraged the families to enrol “as soon as possible”, recording their refusal as non-compliance rather than answering it as a claim (Diplomat_002).

Governments and organisations that refuse or contest, by contrast, are represented as acting for a reason and are answered by a government or a court. In the report of 2023, Mizoram is the grammatical subject of “has decided not to collect”, and the reason follows, “as it would lead to discrimination” (ThePrint_001). An official is reported as explaining that a later chief minister “shifted his position after meeting with the Union Home Minister” (TheWire_001). In South Africa, the High Court found for two organisations that contested the verification of applicants, and the government appealed (Judgment_001; OpenSecrets_001). In Malaysia, UNHCR asked whether decisions to return were “genuinely free and informed”, as did the chair of a refugee organisation, and the core texts record no answer (UNHCR_004; MyanmarNow_001). In these settings, a refusal received an answer as a claim only when a government or an organisation stated it.

5. Discussion: recognisability and the obligation to answer

Research on humanitarian technology has shown that consent “does not always offer protection to those most in need” (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 52) and that a crisis gives “the individual little say at the moment of assemblage” (Sandvik, 2023, p. 25). This research holds that refugees who depend on humanitarian assistance cannot refuse biometric registration without giving it up, so that in camps they cannot choose non-participation (Sandvik, 2023, p. 26; Madianou, 2025, p. 170). Rohingya interviewees had already alleged that those who refused the earlier registration “were informally told by representatives of the government and UNHCR” that they “would not receive rations in the future” (Hossain et al., 2024, p. 101). In the texts in which they set the condition, agencies and governments also name no person who could refuse it (Figure 2). Yet neither this research nor these agencies and governments ask what is owed to a person who refuses and loses assistance as a result. In Bangladesh and Mizoram persons did refuse, and this article examines the answers that they received rather than the data demanded of them.

This article found a first paradox, since those who set the condition name no one who could refuse it, even where they speak of consent, and in two settings withdraw assistance from those who refuse. The person who must choose between being read and receiving assistance did not create the consent dilemma, which those who set the condition imposed (McConnell, 2022, section 7). They could resolve it by offering an alternative to being read, which UNHCR provides for in its guidance for some of those who refuse (UNHCR, n.d., section 5.2). The outcome is therefore their responsibility, whereas through responsibilisation they make it the responsibility of the person who refuses.

Research on governmentality has applied responsibilisation to crime and citizenship (van Houdt and Schinkel, 2014, pp. 60 to 61) and to refugees in camps, whom “resiliency humanitarianism” assists “with the aim of responsibilizing them” (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015, p.

333), and the findings extend it to the condition of assistance. The task transferred to those who receive assistance belongs to what research on humanitarian communication calls “accountability to donors”, as distinct from “accountability to affected people” (Madianou et al., 2016, pp. 960, 962). A person who refuses to be read is therefore held responsible for a task that belongs to the accountability agencies owe to others, which Guttman and Ressler call blaming the victim (2001, p. 122). The conditions that funders set for agencies thus become conditions that agencies set for those who receive assistance.

On the second research question, the article holds that a refusal addressed to those who register is communication, so that the obligations of communication ethics apply to the answer it receives. The families in Bangladesh followed their refusal with a sit-in and with written appeals, including a complaint to four United Nations Special Rapporteurs, and so gave an account of themselves (Diplomat_002). Voice is the capacity to give such an account, and “treating people as if they lack that capacity” is to treat them “as if they were not human” (Couldry, 2010, p. 1). Hospitality, which Silverstone defines as “an obligation to listen and to hear” (2007, p. 136), requires that those who receive such a refusal listen to the reasons given. By encouraging the families to enrol, UNHCR met neither obligation, because it answered their refusal as non-compliance rather than as a claim, and so treated them as lacking that capacity.

Both sources of the criterion of recognition, Kantian ethics and decolonial critiques, identify what those who set the condition withhold from vulnerable populations. In Kantian ethics, justice requires that those on the receiving end be able to “refuse or renegotiate” the tasks assigned to them (O’Neill, 1992, p. 64). The decolonial critique identifies the same withholding, because those who are registered take no part in determining the terms on which they are recognised. One unanticipated finding was that those who refused in Bangladesh also sought to renegotiate, when two Rohingya representatives stated the community’s terms for

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3 accepting registration. This second paradox, that some of those who refuse state the terms on
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5 which they would accept registration, supports the article’s answer to the decolonial
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7 objection, since those affected claimed recognition on their own terms.
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10 This finding goes beyond the expectation, in research on technocolonialism, that
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12 “mundane resistance” takes the form of “non-participation and refusal” (Madianou, 2025, pp.
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14 167 to 168), and it shows the combination of passive and active resistance that Alloa
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16 describes (2023, p. 335). The representatives asked for the word Rohingya on every
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18 document, as the strikers of 2018 had (Madianou, 2019, p. 9; Diplomat_001), and so claimed
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20 fuller identification under their own name. This result must be interpreted with caution,
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22 because one journalist reported the terms from two representatives and the corpus holds no
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24 document written by those who refused. With their refusal, the families nevertheless move
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26 the question from how much an agency or government may read to who sets the terms of the
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28 reading. Recognisability has a negative form in the right to invisibility, and these claims show
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30 its positive form.
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35 The answer that the families received may be explained by the mode of recognition
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37 that agencies and governments extend, which is regulatory rather than political in the sense
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39 distinguished in research on promotional cultures. In South Africa, the claim that received an
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41 answer was aligned with the logic of verification, since it concerned how the government
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43 verified applicants rather than their standing to refuse. The claim of the families, by contrast,
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45 was collective, in that it concerned every Rohingya refugee, and structural, in that it contested
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47 the terms on which all were registered rather than one person’s case. Recognition therefore
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49 requires that those who register answer such a claim in the political mode, which addresses
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51 subjects “as agents capable of making claims on the political order” (Author, 2026, p. 7).
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56 It can thus be suggested that the wrong lies in the answer rather than in the data
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58 demanded of those who refuse, and that it would persist even if a biometric system were
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secure. In O'Neill's reading of Kant, an agent uses others when it adopts fundamental principles "to which others cannot possibly consent" (1989, p. 114), and she applies the same test to "the principles that guide the institution of employment" (1989, pp. 122 to 123). On the Marxist account that she considers, capitalist employment uses workers by making an activity that they cannot choose to avoid "appear to them as one that they could choose or refuse" (O'Neill, 1989, p. 123). On this account, agencies that keep the condition partly to satisfy their funders use those who depend on assistance, since their vocabulary of consent presents as a choice what the person cannot refuse without loss. The same argument allows a biometric condition to be just, provided that the agency or government offers those who refuse an alternative and answers their refusal with reasons.

These findings have significant implications for any agency or government that makes biometric registration a condition of assistance, since four obligations follow from them, and the first two concern the demand. First, it must offer those who refuse an alternative to being read, because it imposed the consent dilemma and can remove it. As the ICRC has undertaken since 2019 to assist those who object without their biometric data (ICRC, 2019, pp. 8, 15), this obligation can be met. Second, it must account to those it registers for the verification that it reports to its funders, given that the task it transfers to them belongs to its accountability to donors.

The other two obligations concern the answer to a refusal, and they follow from the visibility and the legibility that such an answer requires. Third, the agency or government must inform those it registers in their languages and in writing, so that they can refuse as well as consent and state a refusal its officials can read. Fourth, it must answer a refusal in writing and with reasons rather than urge the person to enrol, because hospitality and voice require that it hear the reasons given. The ICRC requires that a person whose consent is invalid be able to "exercise the right to object", and that processing "should cease" when the objection

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is justified and no other legal basis applies (Marelli, 2024, pp. 44 to 45). These obligations also fall on governments, since they lead or share registration in Malaysia and Bangladesh and set the condition themselves in South Africa and Mizoram.

Studies of digital identity call for “a depolarised approach to surveillance and recognition” (Weitzberg et al., 2021, p. 2), and the findings show that an agency or government can read a person without granting the standing to refuse. The article therefore answers the question that these studies leave open, since by its criterion being legible amounts to being recognised only when the person can refuse the terms of the reading. With the distinction between legibility and recognisability, the article explains the first paradox, since agencies and governments obtain the legibility of those they register while withholding from them the standing to refuse. The distinction also explains the second paradox, because those who ask for fuller identification under their own name claim this standing while accepting legibility. Legibility and recognisability are therefore compatible, since a person may agree to be read on terms that the person can accept or refuse. An agency or government that cannot obtain valid consent still owes the person who refuses an alternative and a reasoned answer, an obligation that research on humanitarian communication must include when it addresses biometric registration.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to determine what humanitarian agencies and governments owe to those who refuse biometric registration, and it has identified two paradoxes. The first major finding is that those who set the condition name no one who could refuse it, even where they speak of consent, and in two settings withdraw assistance from those who refuse. In their texts, they state the loss in passive verbs without an agent or present their own decision as an inability, so that the person who refuses appears responsible for it. The findings of this study indicate that UNHCR provides in its guidance an alternative for some of those who refuse, which in

Bangladesh becomes an arrangement for those who cannot attend. The consent dilemma between being read and receiving assistance is imposed by those who set the condition, and through responsabilisation they transfer to the person who refuses the verification that they owe to their funders.

The second major finding is that some of those who refuse biometric registration state the terms on which they would accept it. The evidence from this study suggests that registration is compatible with recognition, since they object to imposed terms rather than to registration itself and ask to be identified under their own name. In Bangladesh, UNHCR answered this claim with encouragement to enrol, and so addressed those who made it as persons to be enrolled rather than as agents contesting the terms of registration for all. Those who refuse in this way claim the standing to be read on terms they have accepted, which is the positive form of recognisability, whereas the right to invisibility is its negative form.

Since a refusal addressed to those who register is communication, the obligations of voice and hospitality apply to the answer it receives, and an agency or government that answers it as non-compliance breaches both. On the reading of Kant adopted here, an agency or government that presents as a choice what a person cannot refuse without loss uses that person, unless it offers an alternative and answers with reasons. Any agency or government that sets the condition owes those it registers an alternative to being read, an account of the verification reported to funders, information in their languages, and a written and reasoned answer. These obligations fall on governments as well as on UNHCR, since governments lead or share registration in Malaysia and Bangladesh and set the condition themselves in South Africa and Mizoram.

This study makes two contributions to the current literature, and the first is theoretical, since it extends the ethics of humanitarian communication from those whom organisations represent to their publics to those whom they register. With the distinction

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between legibility and recognisability, the article specifies what an agency or government withholds when it reads a person without recognising that person, namely the standing to refuse the terms of the reading. The article justifies this standing by Kantian ethics and by decolonial critiques of recognition, which require that vulnerable populations take part in setting the terms of their registration. The second contribution is conceptual, since recognisability is distinct from visibility in research on humanitarian communication and from consent in research on humanitarian data, and with it the article explains both paradoxes.

The most important limitation lies in the fact that the corpus consists mainly of texts by agencies and governments. This choice follows from the question of what they owe to those who refuse, whose words the study can quote only from news reports, mostly in English. The core corpus is small by design, so the findings show what a refusal can be and how it is answered rather than how common either is. Being limited to such sources, the study may reproduce the imbalance of power that it examines and is subject to the decolonial critiques that it applies to agencies and governments. Future studies should be conducted with refugee-led organisations, on questions that they set and in the languages of their members, following what Alcoff calls “the practice of speaking with and to” (1991, p. 23). Such studies would test whether those who refuse claim the standing that recognisability requires, or define it in terms of their own.

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Table 1. Cases and core corpus.

Case	Saved documents	Sets the condition	Supports it	Answers contestation	Refuses or contests	Voice of those subject to it
South Africa	20 (September 2023 to August 2026)	Minister of Social Development, regulations of the Social Relief of Distress grant (2022, as in force from April 2025)	SANews, biometric enrolment by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) (August 2025)	Open Secrets, a SASSA official on consent (August 2026)	High Court, <i>Institute for Economic Justice v Minister of Social Development</i> (January 2025)	GroundUp, a grant recipient (June 2024)
Gaza	20 (May to September 2025)	Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, overview memo (May 2025)	Israel, letter to the Security Council (May 2025)	United States Ambassador to Israel, interview with CBS News (August 2025)	UNICEF, United Nations press briefing in Geneva (May 2025)	Reuters, recipients at a distribution centre (May 2025)
Malaysia	28 (July 2025 to October 2026)	Ministry of Home Affairs, media statement (May 2026)	UNHCR Malaysia, notice on the refugee registration document (January 2026)	Senate, Hansard of the sitting of 23 July 2026	UNHCR, press release on returns to Myanmar (September 2026)	<i>Myanmar Now</i> , Myanmar nationals in Malaysia (October 2026)
Mizoram, India	9 (September 2023 to March 2026)	Union Ministry of Home Affairs, directive (2023), not yet found	Government of Mizoram (2025), not yet found	Parliament of India, answer (2023 to 2026), not yet found	ThePrint, refusal by the Government of Mizoram (September 2023)	<i>The Wire</i> , refugees at Zokhawthar (December 2025)

Note. The node is represented by section 5.2 of UNHCR's *Guidance on Registration and Identity Management*, retrieved in October 2026. Its articulation in Bangladesh is represented by a notice of the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR of May 2023 and by their questions and answers of January 2026. A report in *The Diplomat* of June 2025 records UNHCR's response to refusal, and a second report of the same month, in the context corpus, is quoted for the words of those who refused. The node and Bangladesh account for six saved documents, which bring the corpus to 83.

Table 2. Research questions, sub-questions, concepts and textual categories.

RQ	Sub-question	Concept	Part of the framework	Textual categories (Table 3)
RQ1	Which biometric data must persons provide, and on what condition?	Legibility of the body	Legibility as statecraft, a “coercive abstraction” (Scott, 1998; Sandvik, 2023, p. 27), which biometric registration applies to the body	Deontic modality, semantic relations, wording
RQ1	How is the condition justified, and how is refusal described?	Responsibilisation	Governmentality, which makes individuals and communities responsible for “public tasks” (van Houdt and Schinkel, 2014, pp. 60 to 61)	Deontic modality, evaluation, legitimization
RQ1	Who is said to cause the loss of assistance, and which harm is acknowledged?	Responsibilisation	Health communication, on “blaming the victim” (Guttman and Ressler, 2001, p. 122)	Social actors, nominalisation, semantic relations, epistemic modality
RQ2	Who appears in the document, and in whose words?	Visibility	Recognition presupposes “a form of social visibility” (Alloa, 2023, p. 327)	Social actors, reporting and intertextuality
RQ2	What form must a claim take to be considered?	Legibility of refusal	A condition of an answer, since a refusal must take a form that officials can read (section 2)	Deontic modality, assumptions
RQ2	Under what name are persons recorded, and what standing do they have to accept or refuse the terms of that reading?	Recognisability	The criterion drawn from Kantian ethics and the decolonial critique of recognition	Wording, deontic modality
RQ2	Is a refusal to be read answered as a claim or recorded as non-compliance?	Right to invisibility	The negative form of recognisability, the “right to invisibility” (Alloa, 2023, p. 331)	Social actors, semantic relations, evaluation

Note. RQ1 asks how agencies and governments justify the condition of biometric registration and answer those who refuse it. RQ2 asks how an agency or government ought to answer a person who refuses biometric registration, and whether the agencies and governments in the five settings examined answer in this way.

Table 3. Textual categories, after Fairclough (2003).

Category	Pages	Question asked of the text	Annotated spans
Social actors	145 to 150	Who acts upon whom, and who is absent from the clause?	60
Nominalisation	12 to 13, 143 to 144	Which processes become things, and whose agency disappears with them?	26
Deontic modality	167 to 170	Who is obliged or permitted, and by whom?	26
Epistemic modality	167 to 171	How strongly does the text commit to what it claims?	20
Evaluation	171 to 173	What is presented as good or bad, and on whose authority?	17
Semantic relations	89 to 91	How are refusal and loss connected in the grammar?	32
Assumptions	55 to 58	What must the reader already accept for the sentence to make sense?	12
Reporting and intertextuality	39 to 51	Whose words are these, and how close does the text stand to them?	10
Legitimation	98 to 100	On what grounds is the condition justified?	13
Wording	129 to 133	Which words name the persons and the place?	31

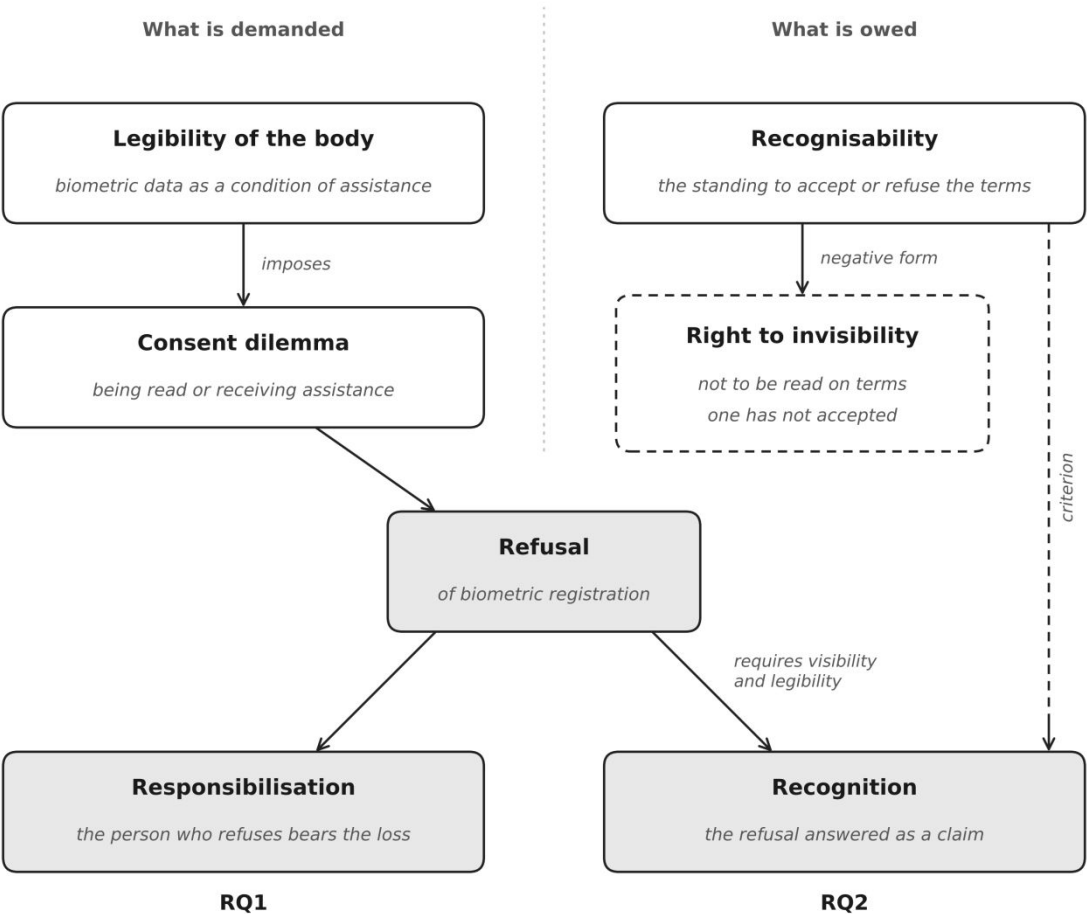


Figure 1. The conceptual framework and the research questions. The left panel sets out what is demanded of the vulnerable populations who are registered, and the right panel what is owed to them. A refusal can be answered with responsibilisation, which RQ1 examines, or with recognition, which RQ2 examines against the criterion drawn from Kantian ethics and the decolonial critique.

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Node		Bangladesh	South Africa	Gaza	Malaysia	Mizoram
UNHCR guidance						
RQ1 <i>justifying the condition and answering refusal</i>						
Biometric registration stated as required	☐	☒	☒	☒	☐	☒
<i>deontic modality</i>						
A right to refuse stated	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
<i>social actors</i>						
A loss or threat follows refusal	☐	☒	☒	☐	☐	☒
<i>semantic relations</i>						
RQ2 <i>those subject to the condition</i>						
Quoted by agencies or governments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
<i>reporting and intertextuality</i>						
Their refusal recorded	—	☒	☐	☐	☐	☒
<i>social actors</i>						
Offered an alternative	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
<i>deontic modality</i>						
☒ Yes ☒ In part, or disputed ☐ No, or not stated — Not applicable						

Figure 2. Findings for the node and the five settings. Each row names a feature of the texts, with the textual category of Table 3 that identifies it in italics, and the last row concerns an alternative to being read for a person who refuses. The columns cover the documents of the node and of each setting in Tables S1 and S2 of the online supplement. A full circle means that these documents state the feature, and a half circle that they state it only in part or that one document states it and another denies it. An empty circle means that they do not state it, and a dash that the feature does not apply.

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Supplemental material

Legible but not recognised. What humanitarian agencies and governments owe to those who refuse biometric registration

Tables S1 and S2 give, for the node and for each of the five settings, the wording behind the findings reported in section 4 and summarised in Figure 2 of the article. Terms in square brackets name the textual category of Table 3 of the article and the feature observed in the annotated excerpts.

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Table S1. Justification and responsabilisation in the node and in five settings (RQ1), with the discourses of each setting and the textual features of the wording. Terms in square brackets name the category of Table 3 and the feature observed in the annotated excerpts, and quotations without brackets come from the same documents outside those excerpts. Modality includes nouns and adjectives of obligation, such as “obligation”, “mandate”, “required” and “mandatory”. Documents are cited by source and number, so that GroundUp_002 stands for 11_MC_2024-06-19_GroundUp_002, and the interactive page described in section 3 gives each full identifier with the textual analysis of the document. English glosses of the Malay quotations are given in brackets.

Setting, documents and discourses	Data demanded	The person who could refuse	Refusal and loss	Justification and funders
Node, UNHCR’s guidance (UNHCR_001). Discourses of identity management, of rights and consent and of protection	“Biometrics are the preferred methodology for verifying an individual’s identity, including at assistance delivery”	“participation in registration is voluntary” [<i>nominalisation, a process without a person</i>]; “their obligation to cooperate” [<i>deontic modality, an obligation that the person possesses</i>]; “the right to refuse the collection of their biometrics on legitimate grounds related to his or her specific personal situation” [<i>social actors, the person as holder of a right; assumptions, refusal requires grounds</i>]; “(and the related right to object)”, which “may be determined according to government policy, not UNHCR policy” [<i>wording, the right in brackets</i>]	“alternative methods identified to ensure they can access rights, assistance and solutions” [<i>social actors, passive without an agent; semantic relations, purpose</i>]; consent to share data is free when a person can “refuse or withdraw without adverse consequences” [<i>semantic relations, consequence excluded</i>]	“The host government has a legitimate interest in knowing who is on its territory” [<i>evaluation, the interest as “legitimate”</i>]
Bangladesh (UNHCR_005, UNHCR_006, Diplomat_002). Discourses of identity management, of	“Biometrics will be enrolled for all individuals 5 years and above” (UNHCR_005) [<i>social</i>	“Participation in the exercise is required for all eligible persons” (UNHCR_005) [<i>nominalisation kept from the node; deontic</i>	“Persons who fail to show up will be inactivated in the MRC, and they will not benefit from any assistance in future” (UNHCR_005) [<i>social</i>	“establishing and preserving identities is key to ensuring protection and solutions for refugees” (UNHCR_005)

Setting, documents and discourses	Data demanded	The person who could refuse	Refusal and loss	Justification and funders
protection and of security and sovereignty	<i>actors, passive without an agent, persons classified by age]</i>	<i>modality, high obligation without a requiring agent]; “alternative arrangements” for anyone “who cannot come to the site” (UNHCR_005)</i>	<i>actors, persons active in a failure, passive without an agent; semantic relations, consequence; epistemic modality, categorical]; “refusing the processing of personal data may lead to deregistration and, as a result, the discontinuation of protection and assistance depending on the circumstances” (UNHCR_006) [nominalisation, refusal and loss without persons; epistemic modality, “may”; semantic relations, consequence]; families “cut off from food aid” (Diplomat_002) [social actors, passive without an agent, in the journalist’s words]</i>	<i>[legitimation, rationalisation]; “aligns with global standards for identity management and is essential for UNHCR to fulfill its mandate” (Diplomat_002) [legitimation, authorisation; deontic modality, necessity]; “help maintain donor confidence”, reported indirectly (Diplomat_002); “no specific protection risks were identified” (Diplomat_002) [social actors, passive without an agent]</i>
South Africa (SRDRegs_001, SAnews_001, GroundUp_002, OpenSecrets_001, Judgment_001). Discourses of identity management and of rights and consent	“mandatory Beneficiary Biometric Enrolment” from 1 September 2025 (SAnews_001) <i>[deontic modality, high obligation; nominalisation, a named programme]</i>	“By virtue of application” an applicant “consents” (SRDRegs_001) <i>[semantic relations, applying as the ground of consent; social actors, the applicant as subject of the consent]; “Applications without biometric data will be immediately put into the review cycle” (SAnews_001) [social actors, applicants as applications, passive without an agent]</i>	“Their grants will remain suspended” (GroundUp_002) <i>[epistemic modality, categorical prediction; social actors, recipients as possessors]; “if you don’t consent, we can’t assess you”, after a comparison with accepting “the T&C’s” (OpenSecrets_001) [semantic relations, conditional; deontic modality, what the agency says it cannot do; wording, a consumer contract]</i>	“to fight fraud”, reported indirectly (GroundUp_002) <i>[legitimation, rationalisation]; “to ensure every grant recipient is verifiably authentic” (SAnews_001) [legitimation, rationalisation; assumptions, authenticity in doubt]; budget “conditional on the agency improving its biometric and income verification processes” (OpenSecrets_001); for the High Court it is “absurd for the respondents to place a duty on the applicants”, since “it is the responsibility of the government” (Judgment_001, para. 124)</i>
Gaza (GHF_002, Reuters_001,	“anyone accessing aid will have to submit to facial	“There will be no eligibility requirements” (GHF_002)	Not stated	“purely based on need” (GHF_002) <i>[legitimation, moral evaluation];</i>

Legible but not recognised 4

Setting, documents and discourses	Data demanded	The person who could refuse	Refusal and loss	Justification and funders
UNGeneva_001, IsraelUN_001). Discourses of protection and of security and sovereignty	recognition technology”, reported indirectly from humanitarian groups (Reuters_001) <i>[deontic modality, high obligation; wording, “submit”]</i>	<i>[epistemic modality, categorical denial]</i> ; “the opportunity to screen recipients”, reported indirectly from Israeli officials (Reuters_001)		“verification measures to ensure that aid does not get stolen by Hamas”, in the letter of the Emergency Relief Coordinator of 16 May 2025 (IsraelUN_001) <i>[wording, the shared term “verification”]</i> ; <i>assumptions, theft taken as possible</i> ; “strict oversight to prevent Hamas’ continued looting of humanitarian resources”, in the reply of the Israeli representative (IsraelUN_001) <i>[assumptions, looting taken as given; semantic relations, purpose]</i> ; “against all humanitarian principles”, in the words of UNICEF (UNGeneva_001) <i>[legitimation refused, by moral evaluation]</i> ; “every dollar is traceable and every outcome verifiable” (GHF_002)
Malaysia (MOHA_001, Hansard_001). Discourses of security and sovereignty, of protection and of belonging	“Kerajaan merekod maklumat identiti dan biometrik” (the Government to record identity and biometric information) (MOHA_001) <i>[social actors, the government as recorder]</i>	“4,010 tahanan telah didatakan” (4,010 detainees have been entered as data) (MOHA_001) <i>[social actors, classified as detainees; wording, a passive verb formed on “data”]</i>	Not stated for refusal; expulsion is “tindakan mandatori” (mandatory action) “akibat pelanggaran undang-undang tempatan” (resulting from violations of local law) (Hansard_001) <i>[deontic modality, high obligation; semantic relations, consequence of the person’s act]</i>	“selaras dengan Arahan Majlis Keselamatan Negara No. 23” (in line with National Security Council Directive No. 23) (MOHA_001) <i>[legitimation, authorisation]</i> ; the government “mengarahkan” (instructed) UNHCR to stop registering (Hansard_001) <i>[deontic modality, a directive]</i> ; registration without the records of any “entiti asing” (foreign entity) (Hansard_001)
Mizoram (ThePrint_001, TheWire_001). Discourses	“an Indian government mandate to enrol residents	Enrolment “is not mandatory”, as the Deputy Commissioner is	Refugees “were warned that those who refused would be questioned	“even though they are our brethren, it is important to have a systematic

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Setting, documents and discourses	Data demanded	The person who could refuse	Refusal and loss	Justification and funders
of identity management and of belonging	in a biometric identification process” (TheWire_001) [deontic modality, obligation as a noun]	reported to say, and “presented by the village council as mandatory” (TheWire_001)	and detained”, reported indirectly (TheWire_001)	way to trace them”, in the words of a legislator (TheWire_001)

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Table S2. Visibility and legibility of refusal in the node and in five settings (RQ2), with the textual features of the wording. Brackets, codes and glosses as in Table S1.

Setting	How officials name those subject to the condition	Their own words, in news reports	Form of the refusal	Answer to the refusal
Node (UNHCR_001)	“Individuals” <i>[social actors, generic];</i> persons “of concern to UNHCR” <i>[wording, a category of the agency]</i>	None, since in the guidance UNHCR tells staff what to say to “individuals”	Refusal “on legitimate grounds related to his or her specific personal situation” <i>[assumptions, refusal requires grounds that another judges]</i>	“individuals may be registered, and alternative methods identified” <i>[deontic modality, permission; social actors, passive without an agent]</i>
Bangladesh	“all eligible persons” (UNHCR_005) <i>[social actors, a generic class];</i> “Persons who fail to show up” (UNHCR_005) <i>[social actors, persons defined by a failure];</i> identity cards without “ethnic identifiers” such as “Rohingya”, reported indirectly (Diplomat_002)	“being forced to choose between hunger and submission to biometrics” (Diplomat_002); “Is this not coercion?” (Diplomat_001)	A “peaceful sit-in”, “registered letters” and a complaint to four United Nations Special Rapporteurs (Diplomat_002); “minimum terms” in the journalist’s words, with “Put it in writing” and “restore the word on every document” in the imperative (Diplomat_001)	“no humanitarian assistance could be provided to those not biometrically registered”, reported indirectly from a letter dated before the registered letters (Diplomat_002) <i>[social actors, persons classified by what they lack; deontic modality, a decision as an impossibility; reporting, indirect];</i> enrolment encouraged “as soon as possible”; the families’ account is “a claim UNHCR disputes” (Diplomat_002); “concerns/complaints” received at a helpline (UNHCR_006)
South Africa	“every grant recipient” to be “verifiably authentic” (SAnews_001) <i>[social actors, generic; assumptions, authenticity in doubt];</i> “the client” (SAnews_001) <i>[wording, a commercial term]</i>	“why do they need to verify your identity again?” (GroundUp_002) <i>[deontic modality, the necessity questioned]</i>	Litigation by the Institute for Economic Justice and #PayTheGrants on the verification of applicants (Judgment_001)	Database verification found “unreasonable and unfair” (Judgment_001, para. 125) <i>[evaluation, negative];</i> the government appeals, and the court’s orders “cannot be implemented until the appeal is heard” (OpenSecrets_001)
Gaza	“anyone found to be connected with Hamas”, reported indirectly from	“I am hungry and my children are hungry” and “I am afraid”	UNICEF objects to “the proposal to use facial recognition as a	No answer to UNICEF in the core texts; a week later the Emergency

Setting	How officials name those subject to the condition	Their own words, in news reports	Form of the refusal	Answer to the refusal
	Israeli officials (Reuters_001); “beneficiaries” (UNGeneva_001) [social actors, passivated]	(Reuters_001) [evaluation, fear, with no clause of refusal]	precondition to access aid” (UNGeneva_001) [social actors, UNICEF as objector]	Relief Coordinator offers “verification measures” in a letter to the Israeli representative (IsraelUN_001) [wording, the shared term]
Malaysia	Refugees “yang tidak mempunyai identiti” (who have no identity), “tidak diiktiraf” (not recognised) by their country of origin (Hansard_001); “tahanan” (detainees) and “migran yang memerlukan perlindungan sementara” (migrants who need temporary protection) (MOHA_001) [social actors, classified; wording, naming]	“Just because there is a signature on a piece of paper doesn’t make it voluntary”, in the words of the chair of a refugee organisation (MyanmarNow_001) [semantic relations, an inference rejected]	UNHCR asks whether decisions to return were “genuinely free and informed” (UNHCR_004) [epistemic modality, questioning; wording, the vocabulary of consent]	No answer in the core texts
Mizoram	“refugees therefore have no right to ask for consent”, reported indirectly from “some officials” (TheWire_001)	“we are afraid to refuse the mandate” (TheWire_001) [evaluation, refusal as the object of fear]	Families “moved out of the camp after refusing to enrol” (TheWire_001); “Mizoram has decided not to collect” the data “as it would lead to discrimination” (ThePrint_001) [social actors, the state as subject of the decision; semantic relations, reason]	No answer to the families in the report, in which refugees “were warned that those who refused would be questioned and detained”; a later chief minister “shifted his position after meeting with the Union Home Minister”, since “The state depends on central approval for key projects”, in the words of an official (TheWire_001)