

> Enduring Exile, Marginalized Refugees: New Partnerships to Energize a Faltering Multilateralism

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Refugees in protracted situations are doubly marginalized: first, as people in flight, torn from their home communities; and second, as aliens in often tenuous sanctuaries. Protracted situations generate further negative consequences, including deep impoverishment, secondary movements and an outsized discourse. Finding themselves marginalized spatially, legally and programmatically, many refugees have undertaken a secondary movement to Europe and beyond.

The international refugee regime was not designed to deal with longstanding, dependent populations. Yet, as the multilateral peace and security system is increasingly unable to resolve problems at their root, it has relied on short-term humanitarianism to respond to long-term displacement.

The secondary movement of refugees has put this approach under the spotlight, leading on the one hand to a reaction that stigmatizes refugees and invokes isolationism, but on the other to a renewed commitment to international and individual solidarity and burden sharing. These underlying trends and developments—including General Assembly resolutions (sustainable development, refugees and migrants), the largely urban nature of displacement and a call for fresh partnerships—offer a chance to reframe and reinvigorate responses to the refugee situation.

REFUGEES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE PERSISTENCE OF EXILE

Refugee situations are not meant to endure. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951 as a temporary

organization, with a five-year existence. For a time, refugee situations had beginnings and endings. Post-partition Indians and Pakistanis, 1956 Hungarians, 1972 Ugandans, 1970s Indochinese, 1980s Guatemalans and 1990s former Yugoslavs: all of these refugees were absorbed into new communities or repatriated.

But some situations persisted. Palestinian refugees fled beginning in 1946 and remain in exile²; Sahrawi refugees fled the Western Sahara in 1975 and struggle on in remote desert camps. At the turn of the century, the number of unresolved conflicts multiplied, and with them prolonged refugee situations. Somalia, Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya and now Syria: the international community, it seemed, could tolerate failed states, conflict and sprawling refugee flows.

In large part, this was because solutions were elusive. In 2015, only 200,000 refugees out of the 16 million under UNHCR mandate repatriated, and 6.7 million (41 percent of those under UNHCR's mandate) were in a protracted situation.³ Some 86 percent of these refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, and by the end of 2015, countries in developing regions hosted 13.9 million of the world's total refugee population, compared with the 2.2 million hosted by countries in developed regions.⁴

PERMANENT EMERGENCY RESPONSE: LOSS OF HOPE, SECONDARY MOVEMENTS

In 2003, the United Nations General Assembly removed UNHCR's temporal limitation, extending it "until the refugee problem is solved."⁵ The UN, it seemed, no longer conceived of a world without refugees, and opted

¹ This piece is written in a personal capacity and does not purport to represent the views of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

for the bureaucratically sensible but conceptually pessimistic approach of putting its refugee agency on a permanent footing.

Inadvertently, perhaps, this crystallized a short-term response mode (emergency/humanitarian) as a long-term strategy, disconnected from political and economic approaches. The archetype of this approach (albeit never the predominant one in practice) was the refugee camp, which saved lives, but kept refugees in geographically distinct spaces, and entrenched marginalization.

For example, Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, three years into exile, were boxed in. War continued in Syria. Livelihood and education prospects were dim. Poverty kept rising—a UNHCR/World Bank report found that 7 in 10 registered Syrian refugees living in Jordan and Lebanon could be considered poor; and that about half of them were vulnerable to food shocks.⁶

When, in addition to that, the World Food Program (WFP) food rations were cut, many felt they had no choice but to set off a dangerous, expensive and uncertain journey to Europe. As a senior UNHCR official stated to the General Assembly, speaking of refugees crossing the Mediterranean, “without safety, access to basic rights and regularization of their status, they will be compelled to move onward to other countries.”⁷

The fact of being a refugee was the driver of marginalization. As former High Commissioner Antonio Guterres put it in October 2015, “for refugees, their legal status is their biggest vulnerability—being poor at home is not the same as being poor in a country that is not your own. It is no coincidence that those crossing the Eastern Mediterranean today are Syrian refugees, and not poor Turks, Jordanians or Lebanese.”

This dramatic secondary movement of people was often reported from the perspective of the European continent—of unmanageable floods of humanity breaching borders and threatening security. But viewed from Jordan or Lebanon, it was something else—the failure of even a relatively well-funded operation to deliver opportunity, inclusion and hope.

NEW, INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND AND RESPOND COMPREHENSIVELY

The arrival of Middle Eastern refugees into the heart of Europe refocused attention on refugee situations, in both positive and negative ways. Whereas one line of argument criminalizes the refugee and invokes barriers,

while ignoring the wider issue of unresolved problems; another has reaffirmed and strengthened calls to deal with refugees comprehensively and inclusively.

In 2015 and 2016, all 193 Member States of the United Nations reached two remarkable agreements: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants.

The 2030 Agenda provides the basis (not apparent in the previous Millennium Development Goals) for making the development of all people, including refugees, a requirement. As High Commissioner Filippo Grandi put it: “the principle of universality, the pledge that no one shall be left behind, and the explicit recognition that refugees and internally displaced people are among the most vulnerable, are a key entry point.”⁸ If no one must be left behind, then part of the “no one” includes refugees; and if a country is serious about meeting its sustainable development goals, it must include all people on its territory, including refugees. This is a powerful argument in favour of refugee inclusion, and the dismantling of separate treatment and response mechanisms.

In the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants⁹ States declare solidarity with persons forced to flee and reaffirm their obligations to fully respect the human rights of refugees and migrants; and, pledge robust support to countries affected by large movements of refugees and migrants. They acknowledge “a shared responsibility to manage large movements of refugees and migrants in a humane, sensitive, compassionate and people-centred manner.” The Declaration outlines elements for a comprehensive response to refugee displacement based on principles of international cooperation and burden sharing. Rather than responding to refugee displacement through a purely, and often underfunded, humanitarian lens, the elements of the CRR framework are designed to provide a more systematic and sustainable response that benefits both refugees and their hosts.¹⁰

Underpinning these efforts are the new UN Secretary-General’s call for a “surge in diplomacy for peace” and a new way of working that recognizes the strategic connections amongst peace, development, human rights and humanitarianism.

Both the 2030 Agenda and the New York Declaration emphasize the need for new and innovative partnerships. The Declaration calls for UNHCR to develop comprehensive responses, and to involve a multi-stakeholder approach that includes “national and local authorities, international organizations,

international financial institutions, civil society partners (including faith-based organizations, diaspora organizations and academia), the private sector, the media and refugees themselves.”

CONCLUSION: “OUR COMMON FUTURE SECURITY”

Former High Commissioner Sadako Ogata observed that there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems. In concepts valid for our era, an earlier High Commissioner, Thorvald Stoltenberg, said in 1990:

If the causes of refugee movements go unchecked...the threat to our common future security is a real and immediate one. But...it is not individual refugees or migrants who pose this threat...The threat of which I speak lies...in the root causes of refugee movements and uncontrolled migration...in the inequalities and injustices that we have created or condoned. The solution is not to put up barriers...What is needed...is a clear policy of asylum for refugees and a firm commitment to development aid...¹¹

When a person fleeing violence or persecution crosses a border and finds sanctuary, that is a small win for postwar internationalism. When that same person finds herself frozen in a “long-lasting and intractable state of limbo,”¹² that win is squandered, and cycled into future problems. Recent agreements, and new UN leadership, provide launchpads to help break the cycle of protracted exile and permanent emergency response. What is now

needed is to give the multilateral, international approach a boost from new and non-traditional partnerships and coalitions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND POLICY GAPS

Objective: mobilize a coalition of non-traditional stakeholders to find a new model of international cooperation and solidarity with refugees in long-term situations.

QUESTIONS:

- The multilateral framework for responding comprehensively to refugee situations is strong and has just been reinforced, but the collective state will to take action has been weaker. What can other actors do to both shore up the traditional structure and move it beyond its current strictures?
- Over 60 percent of refugees are in urban areas, and they are staying there for increasing periods of time. How can we reconceive protection and support to this connected, dispersed and skilled group? Is there a specific type of urban response to refugee inflows? Are there actions and policies that cities and mayors can take that central authorities may not be able/willing to?
- Inclusion is about involving refugees in mainstream programmes in the absence of a true durable solution (e.g., assimilation). What might this look like in practice? Are there any norms or models?

ENDNOTES

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² They do not fall under UNHCR’s mandate as they predate the existence of the office, and have an agency—UNRWA—dedicated to caring for them, but not to finding solutions.

³ Comparing figures over the past 20 years, 2015 witnessed the third-lowest level of refugee returns, with smaller numbers being recorded only in 2010 and 2014. During the past two decades, an estimated 17.1 million refugees returned to their country of origin. However, while some 12.9 million refugees were able to return between 1996 and 2005, just 4.2 million did so in the following 10 years (Global trends)

⁴ UNHCR, Global trends: Forced displacement in 2015

⁵ A/RES/58/153

⁶ The welfare of Syrian refugees: Evidence from Jordan and Lebanon, Verme et al. WB/UNHCR

⁷ Remarks to the UN General Assembly plenary meeting, “Global awareness of the tragedies of irregular migrants in the Mediterranean basin, with specific emphasis on Syrian asylum seekers,” Volker Türk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, 7 April 2017

⁸ Filippo Grandi, October 2015

⁹ A/71/L.1*, 13 September 2016

¹⁰ UNHCR Quick Guide: New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, November 2016

¹¹ Thorvald Stoltenberg, opening statement at the 41st annual session of the Executive Committee, 1 October 1990

¹² UNHCR, ‘Protracted refugee situations’, EC/54/SC/CRP.14, 10 June 2004