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# Refugee Participation Network



**GEOGRAPHIC BIAS IN REFUGEE  
TREATMENT WITHIN HOST  
COUNTRIES**

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#### GEOGRAPHIC BIAS IN REFUGEE TREATMENT WITHIN HOST COUNTRIES

Anyone who works with refugees cannot fail to observe some rather striking differences between need assessment and program development in different places. No one will be surprised to learn that differences in program development and implementation are strongly associated with geographic location. Each host country has its own definition of individual rights and needs based both on the socio-economic situation in the host country as well as how much a host country government and its citizens feel they owe refugees. In addition, many of the donor countries who support refugee programs have socio-political agendas often guided by refugee origins as well as the geopolitical positions of host countries.

When evaluations of refugee programs consider the aspect of geographic location, they tend to emphasize macro-geographic differences, i.e. programmatic biases between refugee recipients in different parts of the world. These macro-geographic comparisons, while important, represent only one level of geographic bias. We all too often, however, ignore differences in refugee management within an individual host country. Programs for refugees from Afghanistan living in Pakistan present a good example of this phenomenon.

The majority of the nearly three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan are located in the North West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P.). Smaller numbers of Afghans are found in Baluchistan and Punjab provinces as well as in various urban areas. Since the Afghan refugee population is such a large one, the actual number of refugees outside N.W.F.P. is by no means inconsequential. The refugee population in Baluchistan, for example, is estimated at approximately 280,000. Refugee assistance programs in Pakistan quite clearly reflect the proportional differential rather than the actual numbers of refugees. In other words, a group of 280,000 refugees in another individual host country would be considered a major refugee problem and receive the attention

normally accorded to large refugee groups. But in Pakistan, the approximately 840,000 Afghans in Baluchistan appear to be viewed as less important than the larger group in N.W.F.P. and, thus, assistance programs have lagged both in time and in numbers.

To associate the difference between refugee treatment in N.W.F.P. and Baluchistan only with numbers, however, overlooks various other factors which undoubtedly influenced this situation. These factors include: 1) ethnic differences; 2) rural versus urban backgrounds; 3) education and employment backgrounds; 4) the influence of Afghan resistance parties and 5) the attitude of the Government of Pakistan (GOP) towards N.W.F.P. versus Baluchistan.

Research done by this and other workers in N.W.F.P. indicates that the majority of the refugees there are either Pashtun (the largest ethnic group in pre-coup Afghanistan as well as the most political and socio-economically influential) or Tajiks from the south east of Afghanistan (the second largest ethnic group and who, in many cases, are associated with Pashtuns by various legal, social and economic ties).

In Baluchistan, however, the ethnic mix is more complex. While Pashtuns probably represent the largest ethnic group, they do not constitute the clear majority as they do in N.W.F.P. In addition, the Pashtuns in Baluchistan came primarily from around the Kandahar area in southern Afghanistan as compared to the Pashtuns in N.W.F.P. whose origins are mostly in the densely-inhabited, less conservative Kabul area and eastern provinces. There are also proportionately far more Persian-speaking refugees in Baluchistan, mainly Uzbeks from the north of Afghanistan and Hazaras from the central highlands as well as Afghan Baluch.

The majority of people from Afghanistan are of rural origin. Yet, some distinction between rural versus urban origin obtains between refugees in N.W.F.P. and Baluchistan. A far larger number of urban Afghans have settled in and around Peshawar, the provincial

capital of N.W.F.P. The larger number of urban Afghans in the Peshawar area is logical given that the general geographic origins of the N.W.F.P. refugees is the more heavily urbanised central-eastern parts of Afghanistan. In addition, even those refugees with urban backgrounds in Baluchistan come mostly from Kandahar, Afghanistan's most conservative and least cosmopolitan city and, thus, display fewer of the traits commonly associated with urban experience.

The ethnic affiliations and geographic origins of the Baluchistan refugees are good indicators of their education levels and employment backgrounds. In Afghanistan, literacy rates were very low and occupations mostly agricultural or menial labouring jobs. There was, however, a notable geographic bias in educational opportunities and associated employment, i.e. better opportunities were available to residents of the Kabul area and eastern provinces and, for the most part, Pashtuns and some Tajiks profited more than other groups. In turn, some groups suffered more than others from this prejudicial treatment. The Shiite Hazaras, for example, are notable for being excluded from most social benefits. Those few Hazaras who 'made it', in fact, are so anomalous that nearly everyone familiar with Afghanistan can name them.

As one would expect, this situation is reflected in the refugee population of Baluchistan where, for example, it is exceedingly difficult to find properly skilled Afghans to fill posts in the refugee voluntary agencies. In some cases, refugees to fill these posts have been recruited in Peshawar.

Afghan political (resistance) parties may constitute the most conspicuous difference in the Afghan refugee populations in Pakistan. Any foreign journalist covering the Afghan situation will attest to Peshawar's central position in the Afghan 'scene'. Several of the resistance party leaders already were in Peshawar when the coup of 1978 occurred. The others joined them

(geographically if not philosophically) at various times after the coup. The point, however, is not so much that the parties are located in Peshawar, but, rather, that the absence of overt political activity in Baluchistan is an indicator of the lower status of the refugees there and has had a profound effect on the Baluchistan-settled refugees. In other words, while the political parties in Peshawar are responsible for some degree of chaos and, often undesirable, control, they also perform the invaluable role of advocates for the refugees. Many of the refugee projects in the N.W.F.P., for example, came about as a direct result of persistent campaigning, as well as considerable assistance in activities such as writing grant proposals, devising curricula and teaching materials, and so on, by various resistance parties. In contrast, refugees in Baluchistan have no such source of advocacy.

Like the Afghan resistance, the GOP regards Baluchistan as something of an 'outback' area. Baluchistan is viewed from Islamabad, as well as Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar, as the most provincial, backward, and in many ways, troublesome area of Pakistan. While the large urban areas of Pakistan recently have been the scenes of political and ethnic unrest, the geographically and politically sacrosanct tribal areas of Baluchistan persist as a strong threat to Pakistan's internal and external security. Ignoring the laws of the country, growing and running heroin and related drugs, siding with the Kabul Government against the Islamabad Government are just a few of the activities engaged in by some of the tribal folk.

The failure of Islamabad to control much of Baluchistan is at least partially responsible for an attitude of neglect. Baluchistan, for example, is potentially rich in natural resources. These go largely unexploited, however, because dealing with and around the tribal areas is so very difficult. Even those resources which are exploited benefit Baluchistan less than the rest of the country. Natural gas from Sui, for example, has been the main source of heating in most of Pakistan for many years. It

became available in Baluchistan only relatively recently.

The Pakistan Government's attitude of neglect/tolerance, combined with the factors specific to the Afghan refugees, have influenced attitudes toward the refugees and programmatic disparities between Baluchistan and N.W.F.P. The imposing edifice, with hundreds of vehicles and employees, of the N.W.F.P. Refugee Commissionerate and the obvious authority of the Commissioner himself is, perhaps, the most eye-catching symbol of this disparity. But, the number and range of refugee assistance programs themselves are a more reliable index. Although the difference is obvious in all areas of assistance (e.g. health, sanitation, income generation, education), education provides the most explicit example.

In theory, the refugees in both N.W.F.P. and Baluchistan should have profited equally by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) decision to include primary education as a basic human right. In practice, however, sharing equally has not been the case. There are at least five separate voluntary agencies in Peshawar involved in various aspects of education for N.W.F.P. refugees. Programs include teacher training, materials production, printing of textbooks and teacher aids, English language training. Several of these agencies began work as far back as 1983 and have developed very successful, far-reaching projects.

Baluchistan, in contrast, has only one private voluntary agency (PVO) education project, initiated in mid-1987 and now beginning to formalise its program. Moreover, given recent political changes, (e.g. the signing of the Geneva Accords on 14 April and related program cuts), it is not unreasonable to predict that this project will not have the opportunity to build a full-scale education scheme.

In addition to the lack of voluntary agency involvement, the GOP Refugee Commissionerate has not been completely successful at

developing adequate educational facilities in the refugee camp schools. It is unlikely to improve now that the refugees are expected to leave soon and the GOP has, on several occasions, expressed an attitude of 'don't make life too nice or they will stay.' There are, for example, no official textbooks and very few of any other kind of books. As of mid-April 1988, Pashtu textbooks promised by the N.W.F.P. Commissionerate and Textbook Board had not arrived for students in the Baluchistan schools which opened in mid-March. Even when these books arrive, they will not be able to be used by the Persian-speaking teachers/students.

The majority of classes have been held outside with the children sitting on the ground. Existing classrooms tend to have no light or, perhaps, one window. Classes may have as many as 80 children of different ages and grade levels and only one teacher. Teachers are largely untrained and many are only semi-literate. The impression one easily gets is that far too many schools exist simply to provide teachers with salaries and parents with a way to keep their children off the streets.

The point of these comments on the educational facilities in Baluchistan is not to place blame on any individual or group. Perhaps no one can be 'blamed' because so many uncontrollable factors, such as those discussed above, subtly affect the situation. By becoming aware of the existing geographic bias in refugee treatment, however, potential biases may be obviated by early planning rather than the usual approach of reacting to existing situations and acting when it is often too late to change anything.

Perhaps the most disturbing facet of these programmatic inequalities is the long term effect it will have on the refugees. The refugees receiving the least assistance also experienced a similar lack of opportunity before they became refugees. Many commentators on the Afghan situation insist that Pashtuns will not

regain the type of control they had in pre-coup Afghanistan. Yet, it is the eastern Pashtuns and associated Tajiks who have had good education and employment opportunities while other groups, such as the Hazaras, Uzbeks and more tribal Pashtuns, continued to have the least advantages.

Thus, the disparities in refugee programs which may be associated with geographic bias will have had several effects. First, they have reinforced the group status that existed before the coup and can be expected to reduce the potential for success of any anti-Pashtun movement in free Afghanistan. Second, these different refugee experiences may determine to some extent who goes and who stays. Baluchistan-settled refugees, for example, may decide that their lot in Afghanistan will be no better or, perhaps, even worse than before the coup. Moreover, should the more politically-involved refugees in N.W.F.P. return to Afghanistan, more jobs may be available in Pakistan. And, finally, should the recent political agreement break down and the refugees not be able to return to Afghanistan, there will be considerable difference in the ability of refugees to integrate into Pakistan society or resettle elsewhere.



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