Camps and freedoms:
long-term refugee situations in Africa

by Arafat Jamal

Increasing numbers of African refugees are stuck in protracted refugee situations.

As both emergency outflows and dramatic repatriations have decreased in recent years, over three million African refugees (predominantly Sahrawis, Burundians, Liberians, Eritreans, Somalis and southern Sudanese) find themselves in protracted situations. Protracted refugee situations – exemplified by the iconic refugee camp, of which there are over 170 in Africa – exist because of an unlikely convergence of interests among hosts, international agencies and refugees. Camps may serve an important emergency protection function but, in the long run, they deny refugees the freedoms that would enable them to lead productive lives. This article looks at current trends in long-term African refugee situations and suggests some ways forward.

Protracted refugee situation: the absence of solutions

Simply put, a protracted refugee situation is one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. Such a refugee is unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance.

Protracted refugee situations are neither natural nor inevitable consequences of involuntary population flows; they are the result of political actions, both in the country of origin (the persecution or violence that led to flight) and in the country of asylum. It should not be forgotten that many former or potential protracted situations no longer exist; post-1945 European refugees, Indo-Chinese boat people and South African political exiles are no longer in an intractable situation. Circumstances changed, or political will was mobilised, to bring about an end to their refugeehood.

From protected to protracted

If refugee situations endure because of ongoing problems in countries of origin, they stagnate and become protracted as a result of responses to refugee inflows, typically involving restrictions on refugee movement and employment possibilities and confinement to camps. With refugees sequestered, concentrated, visible and presumably out of harm's way, camps represent a convergence of interests among host governments, international agencies and the refugees themselves. They are not ideal for anyone but they help focus attention and provide a safety net.

Host governments in Africa are largely poor, often insecure and mistrustful of external commitment to shared responsibility for refugee protection and burden sharing. They see camps as a means of isolating potential trouble-makers and forcing the international community to assume responsibility. For UNHCR, the overriding concern about *non-refoulement* can take precedence over actions to provide economic, social or political freedoms. If camps offer basic protection and a logistically uncomplicated means of delivering assistance, they will be favoured. Refugees themselves may also wish to be grouped in camps. Exile is assumed to be temporary and some refugees see a need to band together for security and social purposes in a new land. Refugees understand that camps make them visible, and keep their plight, and the politics that underpin it, in the world's consciousness. The Sahrawi camps in Algeria are a prime exemplar. [1]

Because prolonged camp stays are largely negative, it is easy to overlook the often critical emergency protection function they provide. In Africa, where refugees are accepted on a prima facie basis, camps help preserve the institution of asylum. To insist that poor African nations should not only accept thousands of refugees but also let them spread throughout the country

camps provide a safety net

is unreasonable. Camps help allay security concerns represented by those perceived, rightly or wrongly, as potentially volatile and disruptive. Camps also ease the burden that huge influxes place on host populations. As traditional African hospitality towards refugees gives way to 'host fatigue', camps strengthen asylum by encouraging hosts to accept the presence of refugees.

By enabling the rapid and efficient disbursement of assistance in emergencies, camps provide a safety net. As some refugees venture out they know that family members left behind in camps will be cared for and that if they fail to make ends meet outside the camp, they themselves may return. Refugees can thus ensure that their least vulnerable family members are able to benefit from the education, health and other services provided in camps.

Despite their drawbacks camps thus serve important protection functions and will continue to be established and maintained. The challenge before us is to combine the positive protective elements of camps while attempting to remedy the negative ones. [2]

Consequences

The list of the consequences of prolonged encampment is long, and includes material deprivation, psychosocial problems, violence, sexual

exploitation, exploitative employment and resort to negative coping mechanisms. Protracted refugee situations perpetuate poverty and underdevelopment because they inhibit freedom. Freedom, as Amartya Sen has famously argued,[3] is both a primary end and the principal means of development. In order to be able to live the kinds of lives that they value – and have reason to value – people must be able to enjoy certain instrumental freedoms: economic opportunities, political freedoms, social facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security.

Do camps provide these freedoms? In theory, at least, they are supposed to supply protection and security. Asylum provides security from violence at home, and camps are the instruments for ensuring that security (i.e. by agreeing to stay in camps, refugees may save themselves from possible *refoulement*). In other respects, however, camps are not designed to enhance freedoms.

They operate under an assistance model that emphasises assistance delivery according to certain standards. The notion of minimum standards, in particular as codified by the Sphere Project, remains open to debate. Nonetheless, in practice, most agencies in charge of camp management attempt to deliver assistance according to certain standards. In times of financial crisis, as is the case today[5], it is a struggle to provide even these minimum standards.

But the attainment of standards, even generous ones, does not address the issue of freedoms. Take Kakuma camp, Kenya. With high levels of violence, temporary shelters and tense refugee-local relations, it is often taken as an exemplar of a camp in which UNHCR has not been able to maintain even minimum standards. Yet a 2000 study revealed that, broadly speaking, not only had minimum standards been attained but in some cases they were better than those prevailing in either the refugees' home countries or elsewhere in Kenya. With distress and listlessness so palpable to even a casual visitor to Kakuma, it is clear that the minimum standards paradigm is incomplete, for even attaining such standards fails to address larger questions of needs and freedoms. [5]

From protracted to productive

Given the generally negative and wasteful consequences of the camp model of settlement, it has been clear for some time that there are other, more logical, humane and cost-effective ways of dealing with long-term refugee situations. As far back as the 1960s UNHCR recognised the wisdom of linking relief to development. This began in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, continued in various countries in Africa in the 1970s, and reached a sort of apogee with the ICARA II process in the 1980s.[6] After a period of retrenchment and increased insistence on encampment, UNHCR is again exploring similar ideas, notably through the 'development through local integration' (DLI) strategy and the notion of refugees as agents of development.

Taking into account the Sen capabilities notion, and aligning itself with World Bank poverty alleviation strategies[8], UNHCR has recently been discussing a policy that focuses on enhancing the productive capacities of refugees pending a durable solution to their plight.[8] This would involve providing refugees with security, removing barriers to self-reliance and creating opportunities. The productive capacities notion respects refugees and their potential. It is both asylum- and solutions-oriented in that it can make an impact on a refugee's current situation while at the same time furnishing him or her with the skills, confidence and resources that both assist and predispose the refugee towards voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration. And it should help to sidestep the long-running, seemingly irresolvable relief/development debate.

Security, self-reliance and opportunities

The provision of **security** is about ensuring that refugees have the necessary physical and economic security to lead productive existences. Guaranteeing physical security is a core UNHCR concern and involves ensuring *non-refoulement* and safe asylum. Economic security in a refugee context means, at a basic level, providing safety nets that prevent refugees from having to resort to negative coping mechanisms.

The second component involves identifying barriers to refugee **self-reliance** and undertaking measures to overcome them. Barriers might consist of legal obstacles preventing refugee freedom of movement, employment or legal access to land. Most of these restrictions on refugee liberties are imposed in contradiction of the 1951 Convention, which attempts to ensure that refugees enjoy a range of freedoms and rights regarding their personal liberty and employment.

The creation of opportunities involves promoting opportunities for refugees to be able to lift themselves out of poverty. This begins with building on existing refugee

Still Pictures/Carlos Guarita

9,000 people depend on one tanker for their water supply in Cuanza-Sul camp, Angola.

capacities and includes, depending on the asylum context, loans, land, tools and income generation projects.

Generalised unfreedom and responsibility sharing

If the solutions are well-known (as, in various permutations, they are), then why are they not implemented, or why do they not work? There are two main reasons: generalised poverty and unfreedom in host countries and the imperfections of the international responsibility-sharing system.

The first issue is straightforward. Refugee camps are restrictive. But if one lifts these restrictions only to thrust refugees into an unfree society, then one is not likely to achieve much. Even in countries where refugees may seek employment outside the camps, many keep a foothold in them because, in a context of general poverty, their chances of becoming self-reliant on their own are not high. Removing barriers to self-reliance and creating opportunities can work but only if the economic context is welcoming. Worse, the host society may itself be dangerous for a refugee, in which case urging a refugee to abandon the relative security of a camp would be irresponsible.

What about the sharing of responsibilities for the protection and assistance of refugees? It is always tempting to blame lack of funds for programme failures. Yet the lack of international commitment to refugee care, protection and solutions is at the crux of the protracted refugee problem in Africa.

Refugee protection is a legal obligation but international burden sharing is 'only' an international principle. States may be taken to task for refouling refugees but not for underfunding programmes. Seven out of ten refugees are found in developing countries, and yet assistance for them is low and erratically provided. Noting the egregious gap between international obligations and international political and financial commitments to refugees, the High Commissioner has wondered if "we are not violating the human rights of refugees … by not providing them with enough assistance for them to live with a minimum of dignity."[9]

The fickleness with which funds are provided for refugee programmes frustrates long-term planning, and keeps camps on an emergency footing long after the emergency has passed. A strong message is sent to host governments: do not count on the international community. So, hosts opt for maintaining camps. They may be inefficient and miserable but they are eyesores and, as such, likely to attract at least some funding. Refugees might do better on their own, in a free environment. Then again, they might not, and the history of refugee protection in Africa is full of examples of development-oriented refugee programmes that did not succeed. Rather than try for development and self-reliance, and risk failure, many host states prefer to maintain the eyesores.

Evidence of sustained donor commitment to refugee integration programmes would undoubtedly encourage hosts to be more innovative. But since past experience shows that self-reliance and other such schemes are often pretexts to cut funding, rather than genuine attempts at change, it is not surprising if hosts and even UNHCR prefer to maintain the status quo.

Conclusion

Fearful and untrusting responses to refugee inflows conspire to create intractable situations. There is room for manoeuvre; the security/self-reliance/opportunities approach outlined above, even if not fully realisable, provides a platform to begin work and exploit possibilities. To an individual it is not relevant whether a particular intervention should be considered relief or development as long as it works and enables him or her to develop skills and exploit opportunities useful both in exile and upon the attainment of a durable solution.

Ultimately, of course, refugee situations are best addressed by dealing with political causes. There have been some recent hopeful developments – in Sudan, Angola and DR Congo and the decision to include refugee issues in the New Programme for African Development (NEPAD) agenda. But given the international community's record of non-engagement in the

continent, it is more prudent for the humanitarian community to concentrate on convincing hosts to grant refugees greater freedoms while urging donors to commit sustained and generous funding.

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Is this realistic? Many previous initiatives in Africa have not borne fruit. Without favourable economic and political conditions in the country of asylum the provision of freedoms to small groups of refugees is unlikely to foster self-reliance. But it is the best option. Those most affected by conflict are best placed to bring about change. Camps may provide security from persecution but if refugees are to prosper, and prove less of a burden, refugees must be given the freedom to make their own choices and to lead productive lives.

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For additional UNHCR analysis of Africa's protracted refugee situations in Africa, see Jeff Crisp's paper prepared for a symposium on the multidimensionality of displacement in Africa, Kyoto, November 2002, soon to be available on the EPAU website at www.unhcr.ch/epau.

1. See the article by Randa Farah pp20-23.
2. See 'Refugee camps and settlements' (*The State of the World's Refugees 2000*) for a resumé of some of the arguments surrounding encampment. www.unhcr.ch/pubs/sowr2000/sowr2000toc.htm.
3. Amartya Sen *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1999.
4. See the Update on p49.
5. See Arafat Jamal *Minimum standards and essential needs in a protracted refugee situation: A review of the UNHCR programme in Kakuma, Kenya,* UNHCR, Geneva, November 2000. Online at www.unhcr.ch/epau.
6. See Jeff Crisp *Mind the Gap! UNHCR, humanitarian assistance and the development process,* UNHCR Working Paper 43, Geneva, May 2001. Online at www.unhcr.ch/epau.
7. As outlined in their *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty.* www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdrpoverty.
8. See, for example, 'Protracted refugee situations: impact and challenges', speech delivered by Kamel Morjane, Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees (Copenhagen, 23 October 2002). Online at www.forgottencrises.dk.
9. 'Refugees in a globalised world', Ditchley Foundation annual lecture, Ditchley Park, 5 July 2002.