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Understanding the dynamics of protracted displacement

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Displaced persons' mobility and their translocal networks can provide important resources in the search for durable solutions.

Almost 20 years ago, UNHCR coined the term 'protracted refugee situations' to draw attention to the plight of refugees in extended exile and to promote durable solutions. However, the search for solutions for persons in longer-term displacement has been at the heart of the international refugee protection regime ever since its beginnings in the early 1920s. What is more, in several major crises of displacement, mobility options have been a major component of successful strategies to resolve these situations. The emergence of a new term thus highlighted, more than anything else, the failure of the international protection regime to deliver a key promise, namely that displaced persons should be able to regain a degree of normality and to rebuild their lives.

Previous research and policy debates¹ have largely focused on protracted displacement as a policy problem while paying less attention to how displaced persons themselves can shape the conditions of protracted displacement. It is the potential for 'solutions from below' that is the focus of the research project 'Transnational figurations of displacement' (TRAFIG) on which the five articles in this mini-feature are based.² In this article, we revisit the concept of protracted displacement and link our understanding of the concept to individuals' agency, understood both in terms of their capability to act and in terms of actual behaviour. Our research has a strong focus on mobility as one expression of displaced persons' agency. Reflecting on historical examples, we examine the role of mobility as a resource for people caught in protracted displacement and as a possible avenue for political solutions to protracted displacement. We end with a brief reflection of the role of current policy approaches in promoting or, indeed, stalling solutions.

Revisiting the concept

In 2004, UNHCR's Executive Committee presented a paper on protracted refugee situations in which it described a protracted refugee situation as "one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo".³ The concept was widely taken up and subsequently also applied to other categories of displacement, giving rise to the broader term 'protracted displacement'.

The concept highlights two aspects of contemporary displacement. Firstly, and reflecting the protracted nature both of conflicts and of persecution in countries of origin, the term simply highlights that exile often extends for many years. Secondly, and more importantly, the notion of protracted displacement emphasises that many displaced persons remain in precarious situations for prolonged periods of time after becoming displaced (in terms of legal status, access to rights and their ability to rebuild their lives), that is, without finding a 'durable solution' to their situation. UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as "one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five consecutive years or more in a given asylum country". At the end of 2020, some 15.7 million refugees or 76% of the global refugee population were in a situation of protracted displacement, of which a large majority had endured for 10 years or longer.⁴ No comparable figures are available for internal displacement. While useful as a broad indication of the scale of the problem, the statistical definition conceals that it is the long-term absence of solutions (rather than the mere duration of exile) that keeps people in protracted displacement. In addition, the statistical concept also does not capture the dynamics of individual

protracted refugee situations. Thus, while the Afghan situation has endured for more than four decades, there have been large-scale returns and new displacements, while individual refugees have often experienced displacement on a recurrent basis.

Reconceptualising protracted displacement

In FMR's 2009 issue on protracted displacement, Gil Loescher and James Milner observed that "protracted refugee situations are the combined result of the prevailing situations in the country of origin, the policy responses of the country of asylum, and the lack of sufficient engagement in these situations by a range of other actors".⁵ While this broad observation still holds true today, it is helpful to examine the more structural forces at play in producing protracted displacement. In our view, these go beyond the conditions in the origin and host countries and the role of other actors in engaging with origin and host countries. Rather, protracted displacement should be viewed as the result of three forces: displacing forces, marginalising forces and immobilising forces. This conception mirrors but is not entirely equivalent to the conventional triad of durable solutions (repatriation, local integration and resettlement) promoted by UNHCR, with their respective association with countries of origin, host countries and third countries.

Displacing forces prevent displaced persons from returning and such forces are present in the country or region of origin and can also be active in first, second and further host countries or regions. Marginalising forces effectively block local integration and operate in the country or region of current stay, whereas immobilising forces hinder (onward) mobility and are at play in the country or region of origin, as well as in transit and host countries.⁶

This conception of protracted displacement allows us to understand protracted displacement as a situation shaped by the dynamic between structural forces and displaced people's agency. In so doing, we suggest moving beyond traditional understandings of protracted displacement as being 'stuck' and as involuntary immobility,

that is, an image of protracted displacement often associated with large refugee camps such as Za'atari in Jordan or Dadaab or Kakuma in Northern Kenya. One should not confuse being trapped or stuck with physical immobility. Indeed, our concept of protracted displacement also captures displaced people on the move who have moved elsewhere from a first host country or region, in an attempt to cope with the situation – as a strategy to find a solution which works at an individual or, more often, a household level.

Displacing forces are not only to be located in the country of origin but in receiving contexts too. In addition, we highlight the combined impact of marginalisation and immobilisation in receiving contexts in preventing displaced persons from finding a 'durable solution' and indeed locking them in a precarious situation. Our conception stresses the need to take a multi-level and transnational approach to refugee protection and to re-focus attention on solutions. Protection from physical harm and persecution is simply not enough. The main impetus for this is to shed light on the role that displaced persons themselves play in coping with displacement, whether or not the solutions they find for themselves are supported by policies designed to help them, or are in fact (and more often) irrespective of and sometimes despite such policies. Refugees' mobilities and translocal connections are an example of such strategies. In the following section, we briefly revisit historical examples of solution strategies capitalising on refugees' own resources and promoting refugees' mobility.

Learning from the past⁷

Fritjof Nansen was appointed first High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921 to address the long-term situation of Russian refugees, and later also Armenian and other refugee groups. The combination of impossibility of return and the poor economic conditions in many first countries of asylum, plus his office's own slim resources, led Nansen to place a strong emphasis on mobility and enabling refugees to travel to where there were jobs. The main instrument to do so was a new travel document for refugees, the 'Nansen passport'.

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Ahmed Ghanem, Shutterstock

International NGO staff talking with Syrian refugees living in section 6 of Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan.

Subsequently, his efforts were supported by a job placement scheme operated by the International Labour Office, under which some 60,000 refugees found employment. But it was really the combination of a) employment demand, b) a travel document enabling refugees to be mobile, and c) some institutional support that enabled the success of Nansen's initiative and brought down high levels of unemployment among refugees.

After World War II, employment-driven resettlement played an even bigger role in providing solutions to displacement, and continued to take place until the 1960s. While these programmes were not unproblematic and were only made possible by a favourable economic climate and a peak in labour recruitment, they highlight the potential of mobility options in resolving protracted refugee situations. A key contrast between post-War resettlement and Nansen's support for refugees' mobility in the interwar period is the greater and almost exclusive reliance on State-led resettlement supported by a considerable infrastructure provided by international organisations. Today the opportunities for mobility are much more limited, reflected in limited resettlement opportunities but also in restrictions on family reunification and more limited opportunities for labour migration.

Conclusions

Mobility has always been an important element in the solutions available to address protracted displacement. As some of the other articles in this feature show, mobility is a highly important coping strategy for individuals, often in defiance of existing policies. The recent emphasis in the New York Declaration and the Global Compact on Refugees on complementary pathways to protection reflects an increasing awareness of the role of physical mobility in promoting 'durable solutions'. At the same time, there are severe contradictions in the policies of key receiving States. In the European context, for example, the EU emphasises the need to facilitate access to durable solutions and enhance the self-reliance of displaced populations, for instance by improving the link between humanitarian and development assistance. And yet the EU promotes policies that attempt to address the root causes of displacement and irregular migration largely through the use of deterrence. Similarly, the EU's support for regional integration and free movement regimes enhances access to mobility as a livelihood strategy which is, at the same time, limited by the EU's externalisation policies that demand third countries' compliance with migration control conditions in exchange for support.⁸

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In sum, there is a need to both refocus policies relating to international protection in general and protracted displacement in particular on protection outcomes, and to assess the ‘fitness’ of policies according to their capacity to promote durable solutions.

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1. See FMR issue33 (2009) for a snapshot of debates more than a decade ago www.fmreview.org/protracted

2. The project has received generous funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant No 822453. More information on the project is available at www.trafig.eu.

3. bit.ly/EXCOM-2004-protracted

4. UNHCR (2021) *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020* www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020, p20. In 2017, some 22% of the then protracted refugee situations had lasted

more than 38 years, and 51% between 10 and 38 years. Calculated from UNHCR (2018) *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017* bit.ly/UNHCR-GlobalTrends2017 p22

5. Loescher G and Milner J (2009) ‘Understanding the Challenge’, *Forced Migration Review* issue 33 www.fmreview.org/protracted/loescher-milner

6. Etzold B, Belloni M, King R, Kraler A and Pastore F (2019) ‘Transnational Figurations of Displacement: Conceptualising protracted displacement and translocal connectivity through a process-oriented perspective’, TRAFIG working paper No 1. BICC, p2–25. bit.ly/TRAFIG-WP1-2019

7. This section is based on Kraler A, Fourer M, Knudsen A, Kwaks J, Mielke K, Noack M, Tobin S and Wilson C (2020) ‘Learning from the Past: Protracted displacement in the post-World War II period’, TRAFIG working paper No 2. Bonn: BICC. <https://trafig.eu/output/working-papers/trafig-working-paper-no-2>

8. Ferreira F et al (2020) ‘Governing protracted displacement: An analysis across global, regional and domestic contexts’, TRAFIG Working Paper No 3, BICC, p38 bit.ly/TRAFIG-WP3-2020; see also main feature on Externalisation in Forced Migration Review issue 68 www.fmreview.org/externalisation.

To watch the launch event for this FMR feature (forthcoming after 14 December), visit <https://trafig.eu/events/zooming-in-on-migration-and-asylum>.