

Flexible mandate for protection

Andreas Kamm

The Danish Refugee Council has had to adjust its mandate more than once in order to live up to its vision that no displaced person should be denied protection and a durable solution.

When the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) was established in 1956, the task of the organisation was limited to receiving and integrating the 1,400 Hungarian refugees who had fled to Denmark following the Soviet invasion of their country. At the time nobody expected that more refugees would come to Denmark and DRC was to be dissolved after the Hungarians had found their way into Danish society.

Today, more than 50 years later, DRC still exists. Initially, it was the arrival of new groups of refugees in Denmark that gave the organisation more work. Later, the knowledge and lessons learned from assisting refugees in Denmark were used to assist people in need of protection in other countries. Today, DRC works in more than 30 countries.

In contrast with the world of 1956, it is now increasingly difficult to distinguish between migrants,

regular or irregular, due to the mixed motivations for migrating and due to the frequent phenomenon of changing status en route. For instance, someone who is first displaced within his or her own country – an IDP – may then cross the border to a neighbouring country – thereby becoming a refugee – only to move on to other countries as a migrant in search of improved livelihood opportunities.

Whatever its causes, displacement inevitably leads to pressure on people's rights. And people without rights need protection – not necessarily against persecution (like refugees) but against the loss of rights to a dignified life. In that sense, the concept of protection has developed from protection against persecution to protection of rights in general. Because DRC is a rights-based organisation it has been able to add new groups to the list of its beneficiaries and

to modify its mandate more than once by adapting and extending the original understanding of the concept of protection.

National focus on integration

Since the first group of Hungarian refugees came to Denmark, DRC's national focus has been on integration. One aspect of this is about enabling refugees to exercise an equal right to, for example, housing, education and work. The other main aspect of integration is promoting tolerance and a welcoming attitude within the receiving society towards new citizens, who often have different habits and customs.

Over the past years, the challenges have been exacerbated by increased migration flows in the globalised world and in Denmark. Migrants from developing countries often have the same needs for integration support as refugees do. Furthermore, the receiving society often views the two groups – migrants and refugees – as the same, with the result that integration and acceptance of refugees in particular depend on the integration of all new citizens. Therefore, it soon became obvious to DRC that its work towards successful integration in Denmark necessarily had to include integration of other migrant groups as well as refugees.

Some of the services provided by DRC – such as language training, social and cultural sensitisation, assistance to vulnerable families and interpretation services – are now made available to workers from other European Union countries too, and DRC's mandate is being adapted to include irregular migrants, au pairs and other persons in need of help and counselling in relation to their legal status and options in Denmark.

Refugees, IDPs and irregular migrants

As the majority of the world's displaced people today are internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugee organisations like DRC have had to extend their mandate to include IDPs. This adjustment of the mandate has not been the last, as



Detention centre for refugees and migrants on Italy's Lampedusa Island.

UNHCR/ADI Loreto

displacement today has many causes other than persecution. Poverty and miserable living conditions are forcing a growing number of people to move. And since it is not always possible for these people to obtain visas or even travel documents that will make the journey to a new country easy, most of them end up as so-called irregular migrants.

Irregular migrants worldwide are trapped in a grey area. They might be accepted in society as cheap labour but they work illegally and have no access to education, health care or other services. Being without legal rights, they are vulnerable to violations of their human rights and risk becoming victims of trafficking, human smuggling and inhuman treatment, or even losing their life. Reports of such abuses and suffering are regularly found in documentation of migratory flows between, for example, West Africa and the Canary

Islands, the Horn of Africa and the Gulf States, and across Central and Eastern Europe.

The loss of rights associated with the status of irregular migrant establishes the need for protection of individual fundamental rights. DRC is already working with groups of people who are considered irregular, such as rejected asylum seekers who are not living legally in Denmark.

Dilemmas and challenges

Although it has been an obvious and appropriate decision for DRC to extend its mandate and include new target groups, assisting the new groups of beneficiaries has raised new challenges for the organisation. For example, offering assistance to IDPs has required the organisation to become adept at humanitarian diplomacy. DRC tries to meet the many challenges by focusing on transparency in its work, by

ensuring involvement of displaced people and by always staying in close contact with authorities and governments with regard to DRC's humanitarian mission.

Recent complex trends in migration have contributed to increasing xenophobia in receiving countries. Over the next 50 years, climate change will increasingly undermine livelihood opportunities for many people in the developing world; for many people a natural response is likely to be to migrate in search of alternative opportunities elsewhere. There may well be other triggers of displacement and DRC will need to continue to exercise flexibility in its interpretation of rights and of its mandate.

Andreas Kamm (Andreas.Kamm@drc.dk) is Secretary General of the Danish Refugee Council (<http://www.drc.dk>).