

# From a critique of camps to better forms of aid

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**What insights can the pre-eminent critic of camp-based aid provision, Barbara Harrell-Bond, offer contemporary practitioners?**

Barbara Harrell-Bond's major works *Imposing Aid* and *Rights in Exile* (the latter co-authored with Guglielmo Verdirame) examine aid modalities in two different eras: Southern Sudan in the early 1980s, and Kenya and Uganda in the late 1990s. They are rich in detail and insights, devastating in their critique of the policies and practices of UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and yet anchored in hope for different, better forms of humanitarian action. With a humanitarian aid industry struggling to adapt to changing patterns of displacement and settlement in a world in which the majority of displaced people do not reside in camps, can Harrell-Bond's analysis help inform current approaches to assistance?

*Rights in Exile*<sup>1</sup> presents a litany of cases in which the rights of refugees

were metaphorically exiled through the provision of aid. The authors detail multiple instances in which the basic rights that form constituent elements of refugee and human rights conventions were curtailed, and sometimes actively abused, by the very systems of protection and assistance that host governments and the international community had established. The groundbreaking critique made for devastating reading at the time. However, three aspects of its analysis frustrate any attempt to garner useful guidance for thinking through contemporary arguments about the relative merits and failings of camp-based versus other forms of assistance.

The first of these relates to scale. The authors' organising frame of reference is the list of rights against which they documented at least one violation, and in most cases multiple violations. However, this does not

really give a sense of relative importance or likelihood of future violations under similar conditions. As a humanitarian professional in a world of scarce resources and tough managerial decisions, I need to know the scale and importance of specific rights violations. This may be at odds with a purist view of the inalienable nature of each and every human right but the pragmatics of resource allocation and intervention selection require a better sense of relative incidence and importance.

Second, there are few comparative references to rights violations outside a camp setting. Those that are mentioned relate primarily to processes which drive refugees into camps in the first place. There is no equivalent treatment of rights violations in rural or urban communities. While largely outside the scope of her analysis, this remains an important dimension for any comparative evaluation of camps as sites of aid provision.

Third, while the approach is impressively forensic in establishing that multiple rights were violated, it lacks a framework to help sort through the assembled cases to determine what was specific to a certain confluence of events, policies, resource constraints and managerial choices, as distinct from an unavoidable, essential consequence of creating and managing refugee camps or settlements. This makes it extremely difficult to evaluate the conditions under which such rights violations are likely to (re)occur. There are important clues in Harrell-Bond's books that allow the reconstruction of some sort of a hierarchy of rights, the violation of which provides the context in which a whole host of abuses can follow. Foremost among these relate to the absence of choice for displaced persons in camps (relating to freedom of movement, and the ability to work, generate income and participate in formal labour markets) and the absence of voice (relating to freedom of expression and to self-organise). Without these basic rights, any sense of resilience, self-reliance or agency is rapidly removed, and the risk of de facto collective punishment increases dramatically. While there has been progress in some settings at certain times towards more open camps and greater economic opportunities, it is by no

means commonplace that such rights coexist with contemporary camp-based aid provision.

### The continuation of camps

Many of Harrell-Bond and Verdirame's arguments are now part of mainstream discourse about the importance of aid provision within and beyond camps: the importance of the right to work, freedom of movement, safety from sexual violence and so on. UNHCR's policies on out-of-camp assistance have shifted, and new modalities for providing assistance to self-settled refugees (primarily in urban contexts) are of increasing importance. Nevertheless, camps persist, and we appear to be in a mixed – sometimes contested – phase of aid delivery, in which the primacy of camps as aid provision sites has been challenged but in which camps continue to play a major role in responses to forced migration. Harrell-Bond provides three reasons why the international aid industry continues to favour camps.

First there is the issue of resource mobilisation: "To attract money, refugees must be visible."<sup>2</sup> Camp-based responses facilitate the quantification of beneficiaries, the calculation of resourcing requirements, and the presentation of physical results: people fed, latrines dug, water supplied, shelters erected, activities conducted. All of this information is essential to attract and renew donor funding. Donor and media visits are easier to structure around a single, easily identifiable site, and camps provide a persistent reminder of continued need. While accepted practices for aid communications have shifted over the intervening years, with a greater emphasis on highlighting self-reliance and empowerment, camps still provide an important part of the stories the aid industry tells about itself.

Second there is the relative ease of beneficiary targeting in camps:

*"It is difficult to count the numbers of self-settled refugees, and even if they could be identified, the policies of most refugee agencies are too inflexible to allow them to devise a programme which would assist a target population which is 'mixed up' with the local community."*<sup>3</sup>

This view from the 1980s is a little dated, since donor and implementing agencies

now routinely target both displaced and host populations. Nevertheless, targeting remains a challenge for humanitarian agencies in urban settings, with so-called 'area-based' interventions sufficiently unusual as to be still regarded as innovative within the sector. Camps undoubtedly simplify matters by giving the camp authorities the power to count, register and organise people (with all the attendant risks of rights-violation that Harrell-Bond identifies).

Third, and related to the above, donors tend to earmark funding for direct refugee response rather than for "expanding the economic and social infrastructure which would cope with such dramatic demographic changes".<sup>4</sup> While there are potentially significant changes afoot, with the World Bank and other development actors beginning to commit resources to meet the challenges of forced displacement both in terms of policy change and infrastructure support, these remain the exception. Humanitarian and development funding streams remain separate in most donor agencies, which in turn fuels distinct humanitarian implementation responses which are short-term in focus and execution. With some caveats, Harrell-Bond's observation holds true today: pouring money into humanitarian responses, including camps, is easier for donor and implementing agencies than thinking through long-term infrastructure and employment challenges in partnership with host governments.

There are, however, other reasons why camps might exist and persist in different contexts: political expediency for the host government, lack of absorption capacity in existing settlements, lack of necessary services at the scale required, and so on. Defining and measuring the relative benefits of how aid is provided remains a challenging question for the contemporary practitioner and researcher alike.

### Pathways to better aid

So how do we decide where resources are best allocated and what aid modalities are most supportive of refugee needs and aspirations? Harrell-Bond concludes

*Rights in Exile* with a statement that is tantalising and frustrating in equal measure:

*"Further research is called for. In particular, cost-assessment studies of encampment are much needed. If, as we would hypothesise, camps are more expensive than interventions aimed at local integration and development, then there should be no obstacle to making the pursuit of the latter the primary objective of humanitarian assistance programmes for refugees."*<sup>5</sup>

Very little progress has been made in the cost-benefit analysis of different aid modalities over the decade and a half since publication. This is perhaps with good reason: costing camps is relatively simple but costing service provision in urban settings is significantly more challenging, given the range of service providers and potential funding streams. And there is a still more complex set of conceptual problems to resolve: the need for a framework of equivalence in individual and collective outcomes in the different settings. Despite these challenges, progress is being made in bringing agencies together to use similar costing methods, a small but by no means insignificant step towards greater cost transparency and comparability. It is conceivable that in a few years we might answer Harrell-Bond's hypothesis with a degree of accuracy.

At that point, we will confront her other, rather optimistic hypothesis that better information will lead to better interventions. This hope underpins both books and stands in stark contrast to her analysis of agency self-interest in perpetuating camps as the primary location for aid provision. Time will tell whether her hope will be realised.

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1. Verdiramé G and Harrell-Bond B (2005) *Rights in Exile: Janus-Faced Humanitarianism*, Berghahn Books

2. Harrell-Bond B (1986) *Imposing Aid – Emergency Assistance to Refugees*, Oxford University Press, p8.

3,4. *Imposing Aid*, p8. 5. *Rights in Exile*, p334.