

The shortcomings of employment as a durable solution

Nora Bardelli

The refugee assistance regime that prevails today seems to insist that the best, or only, solution to protracted refugee situations is firmly rooted in improving access to employment. This approach, however, inevitably favours some and excludes others, while also ignoring the deeper political and social issues at stake.

Labour and capital investment are increasingly seen as the solution to protracted refugee situations. Aid agencies expect forced migrants to be good entrepreneurs and to become self-reliant by finding jobs and/or starting businesses. This puts the responsibility of 'succeeding' firmly on the refugees' shoulders. While this is not an official durable solution (yet), local integration (which is) is increasingly understood to mean being able to participate in economic activity.

I am not questioning the desires and aspirations of refugees to become self-sufficient, nor the need to support refugees to access job opportunities, but I am concerned by the deeper implications of this change in attitude. The "need for individuals to help

themselves rather than relying on the State"¹ is promoted by two principal tendencies in contemporary humanitarianism: first, by the increasing emphasis that the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and other agencies put on economic livelihoods programmes and economic self-reliance and, second, by the growth of public-private partnerships in refugee assistance programmes.

This imposes on refugees the responsibility to create their own durable solution through employment. Within this framework, the official durable solutions – which are all based on the idea of re-creating someone's link with the State and the possibility of citizenship – become out-dated. The solution to displacement is now re-defined in developmental

terms and made into an economic issue rather than a political and social one.

This approach to refugee assistance and protection also ends up homogenising people and excluding those who cannot fulfil the 'entry requirements'. Of course, cash-based interventions and support to enter the job market (although most jobs in the informal market are not classified as employment by international agencies) seem more dignifying ways of providing aid than delivering purely material assistance in that they give refugees a choice, but this only helps some of the many. A wide variety of reasons – whether linked to personal situations and experiences or structural unemployment – can prevent a person from working.

Depoliticising refugee protection

The shift of responsibility in 'succeeding' in one's refugeehood is already perceptible in Burkina Faso, where I have conducted ethnographic research with Malian urban refugees in Bobo-Dioulasso.

Aminata, a Malian refugee of around 80 years of age, who had physical disabilities and was in frail health, shared her house with her granddaughter. Aminata was categorised as a vulnerable refugee by UNHCR, as was her granddaughter, being a minor living with an old and ill grandmother. They received food and cash assistance nearly every month for three and half years but in January 2016 the assistance stopped. UNHCR and WFP Burkina Faso, who provided this assistance, cited lack of funding and the fact that assistance does not need to be provided for urban refugees but can be provided if there is sufficient funding and willingness. When the decision to stop the assistance was taken, agency representatives promised that it would still be provided to those refugees categorised as vulnerable. Despite this promise, Aminata and her granddaughter did not receive any further support. At her age and with her caring responsibilities, how was she supposed to take advantage of "all the opportunities refugees have in cities" (a widely held view, repeated to me by various humanitarian actors when discussing the help that never came)? It is generally thought that urban

refugees, even those qualified as vulnerable, are surrounded by job opportunities – especially in a place like Burkina Faso where Malians have the right to work – or that they have someone in their close network who will have a job and thus be able to support them.

Many studies exist that discuss why an idea of development as economic growth, in all its forms, cannot work, particularly in the long term, serving rather to favour some and exclude and marginalise others.² The 'refugee problem' has become a matter of access to the job market rather than a political question about inequalities, exclusion, conflict, exploitation, asymmetrical power relations, and so on. The human, social and political issues are replaced by market solutions. This depoliticised vision constructs refugees' hardships as being due to a lack of access to jobs and does not in any way address how and why people have become refugees in the first place.

For well over two decades, forced migration and refugee studies have questioned the 'refugee' category and how those thus labelled are represented and portrayed, in order to highlight the impact on refugees' lives of labels, representations and language – and the practices and policies that derive from such discourses. Today, there is a tendency for many researchers to focus on showing how refugees have economic agency, or on providing data on how to support them in their economic livelihoods. What seems to be seen as less important now – and yet what is surely still vital – is what this means in terms of protection and what impact such neoliberal discourses and practices have on refugees' lives.

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1. Scott-Smith T (2016) 'Humanitarian neophilia: the 'innovation turn' and its implications', *Third World Quarterly* 37(12), p2238 <http://tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2016.1176856>

2. See for example Rist G (2014) *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* <http://bit.ly/Rist-G-Development-2014>

3. Doc.Mobility fellow, Swiss National Science Foundation.