

Local integration: reviving a forgotten solution



Alexandra Fielden and Jeff Crisp

A combination of historical trends, the changing policies of governments and renewed efforts by UNHCR have all begun to strengthen the potential of local integration as a lasting solution for refugees.

In April 2001, UNHCR published a research paper on the local integration of refugees in developing countries. Its title was *The Forgotten Solution*. A year later, an NGO statement to the Global Consultations on International Protection made a very similar assertion: "Although local integration is always listed among the three durable solutions, in fact it is rarely used in cases of mass influx and has, in that context, almost become a 'non-solution'."¹

As these statements suggest, the potential of local integration as a solution to refugee situations has received relatively little attention in recent years. Indeed, from the early 1980s onwards, states and UNHCR alike progressively adopted the position – perhaps even a dogma – that repatriation constituted the only viable solution for the vast majority of the world's refugees. Thus, in 1996, UNHCR's Executive Committee adopted a Conclusion that stated very clearly – if somewhat ungrammatically – that voluntary repatriation was "the most preferred solution" to refugee situations.

A forthcoming study from UNHCR's Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES) puts such statements in a new perspective.² For a start, the study points out that local integration has never been quite as forgotten as many analysts have assumed it to be.

While the number of refugees who have benefited from this solution may be modest in comparison with those who have been able to return to their country of origin, different forms of local integration have provided a solution for exiled populations throughout the world. These include, for example, groups of Guatemalan

and Salvadorean refugees in Belize, Costa Rica and Mexico; Tajik refugees in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan; Vietnamese refugees in China; Afghan refugees in India; Irian Jayan refugees in Papua New Guinea; and refugees from former Yugoslavia in Serbia and Montenegro.

The PDES study also draws attention to the fact that there is no real logic in confining the discourse on local integration to refugees in developing countries. While detailed statistics are difficult to establish, it is evident that many of the asylum seekers who have been granted refugee status in the industrialised states of Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific region have become naturalised citizens of their asylum countries. According to information received from the Canadian government, for example, "about 50% of cases of asylum seekers are approved and over 90% of these go on to become permanent residents."

An even more striking finding of the study is the extent to which local integration is beginning to find its way back onto the international refugee policy agenda. In 2005, for example, the UNHCR Executive Committee agreed upon a Conclusion on Local Integration which underlined the need for comprehensive approaches to refugee problems, and which emphasised "the important place which local integration can have in such comprehensive arrangements." The same Conclusion also "urges states and UNHCR to continue working proactively on local integration where appropriate and feasible and in a manner that takes into account the needs and views of both refugees and their hosting communities."

Since that Conclusion was established, some significant developments have taken place in the implementation of this approach, especially but not exclusively in Africa. By far the most significant example in this respect is to be found in Tanzania, where the government has recently reversed a longstanding policy. This had insisted that refugees and their descendants who arrived from Burundi in the early 1970s would eventually have to repatriate, even if they had been born in Tanzania, had spent the whole of their life in that country and had achieved a high level of social and economic integration there.

With the introduction of a new and radically different policy, initiated by Home Affairs Minister Joseph Mungai, the '1972 Burundians' have now been offered the opportunity to acquire Tanzanian citizenship. According to UNHCR, which has undertaken a general census of the refugee population and a comprehensive individual registration exercise, some 170,000 refugees, around 80% of the population, seem likely to avail themselves of this opportunity. A key factor in the implementation of this initiative will be the response of donors to a UNHCR appeal requesting some \$16 million for activities in support of the local integration and naturalisation of the refugees.

According to the research undertaken by PDES, Tanzania is not alone in its readiness to reconsider the solution of local integration. In Angola, for example, the authorities have indicated their willingness to give permanent residence rights to some 14,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, while local integration opportunities appear to be opening up for Congolese and Chadian refugees in Gabon.

In Namibia the government has suggested the establishment of a pilot local integration project

for an initial 500 of the Angolan refugees in the country. And in West Africa, host countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone have all recently expressed a readiness to consider the local integration of refugees originating from within the ECOWAS region.

While these initiatives are all in their early stages, the solution of local integration appears to be finding its way back onto the international agenda. A number of different factors appear to have prompted this development.

Global refugee numbers have gone down in recent years, creating a more positive environment for solutions than existed in the 1990s, when the world experienced a spate of massive armed conflicts and cross-border population movements which were perceived as a serious threat to local and regional security. Now that many of those conflicts have been brought to an end and large numbers of refugees have been able to return to their countries of origin, governments of refugee-hosting states have perhaps been able to adopt a more positive attitude towards the continued presence

and local integration of the much smaller 'residual refugee caseloads' that remain in their territory.

At a time of rapid globalisation and mass international migration, there also appears to be an emerging consensus concerning the ineffectiveness of policies which insist that everyone should live in their country of origin and, if they have been forced into exile, return to that country. This is especially the case when the people concerned are young people who have never lived in their putative 'homeland'.

Finally, there is reason to believe that UNHCR itself has recently played a valuable role in drawing international attention to the problem of protracted refugee situations and underlining the need for them to be addressed in a vigorous and innovative manner.³

That has not always been the case. In 1995, for example, the organisation published a book entitled *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solutions*, which remarkably failed to make a single substantive or positive reference to local integration. Now that this issue has attained a more prominent place on the

organisation's list of priorities, it is to be hoped and expected that this solution will no longer be as 'forgotten' as it was in previous years.

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1. NGO Statement on local integration, Global Consultations on International Protection, 22-24 May 2002. Available at www.icva.ch/doc0000865.html

2. *Local integration: capitalizing on the potential of a solution to protracted refugee situations*, by Alexandra Fielden, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, UNHCR.

3. For a compilation of the studies that UNHCR has undertaken on this issue since 1999, see www.unhcr.org/research/46adfe822.html.

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Applications/enquiries to forcedmigrationdesk@mcrg.ac.in or Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, GC-45, First Floor, Sector-III, Salt Lake City, Kolkata 700 106, West Bengal, India. Applications must be received by 31 May 2008.

CAMP MANAGEMENT TOOLKIT 2008

Available in May

The inter-agency *Camp Management Toolkit* has been revised, and its 2008 version will be available in hardcopy, including Toolkit CD (contact camp@nrc.no), and online (www.nrc.no/camp) at the end of May 2008. Taking a comprehensive and holistic look at camp management as a recognised and vital humanitarian sector, the *Camp Management Toolkit* incorporates a wide range of relevant information on various aspects of camp operations, particularly the roles and responsibilities of a camp management agency.

Published by the inter-agency Camp Management Project 2008 (NRC, UNHCR, DRC, IRC, OCHA, IOM) through the Norwegian Refugee Council.