

Prolonged stay in a refugee camp: some thoughts

A refugee described my camp as 'a boredom-filled milieu full of paranoia sufferers'.

Real or simulated dependency and an unavoidable behaviour pattern go hand-in-glove with a prolonged stay in a refugee camp. It is not only obvious in the attitude of those refugees who hang around the administrative complex in a camp, clamouring for non-food items - the hard currency in many camps - and jobs, but it also affects refugees with entrepreneurial skills: those who boast that they would manage well if the assistance programme came to an end but who can hardly hide their concern about their mini-enterprises when a certain food item is excluded from the weekly or monthly food distribution or when there is a general reduction in refugee rations. The refugee camp is a fertile ground for credulity and false expectations, preventing young refugees from genuine participation in human development programmes such as skills development projects and income-generating schemes.

After several years of life in a refugee camp, the refugee should ask him/herself some important questions:

Have I acquired new skills? Have I lost a skill? Have I forgotten myself in the drudgery of camp? Have I contributed to the development of my refugee community?

Many male heads of refugee families in our camp have justified their decision to raise their children in a refugee camp which has educational facilities but where cultural chaos is a springboard for child unruliness. One refugee father told me: "It is like choosing the lesser of two evils: close your eyes to the cultural chaos in the camp, letting your children grow up in a culture of dependency but learning in the camp school - or leave the camp and lead a life in a war-torn country where children, if not drawn into the culture of anarchy, will remain war-affected most of their lives." These are the choices that responsible refugees have to make about their life in a refugee camp.

Few refugees would regret their decision to stick to a camp life if refugees and those working with them cooperated in pursuit of a fundamental goal: arming refugees with experience, knowledge and skills.

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