

AMERA: delivering a refugee-centred approach to protection

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Former AMERA staff and advisers reflect on the impact this NGO had in advancing refugee protection and how it embodied Barbara Harrell-Bond's philosophy.

Founded by Barbara Harrell-Bond in 2003, the Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance (AMERA) organisation embodied her philosophies of promoting refugee voices, ensuring accountability among the people and institutions mandated to decide refugees' destinies, and achieving normative change within the refugee protection sector through continuous learning and truth seeking. AMERA paved the way for many other similar organisations, serving as a flagship model to expand integrated legal aid services for refugees in South America, the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia.

AMERA positively affected the lives of every refugee and caseworker working with or served by it during its 11 years of operation in Cairo.¹ Too often the subjects of daily xenophobic harassment and attacks, refugees found a safe space in AMERA where they were treated with respect. Hosting one of the largest urban refugee populations in the developing world, Cairo presented an enormous and challenging workload for AMERA staff and volunteers. At AMERA, protection for refugees focused not just on obtaining refugee status but also on enhancing their safety and dignity in Cairo, and it was the first and only organisation in Egypt to provide legal, social and mental health services to refugees under one roof.

Barbara's emphasis on empowering refugees to direct their own cases was embedded in the ethos of AMERA and its staff. She exposed the silencing of refugees in institutional frameworks, challenging humanitarians to examine the roles of 'victim' and 'saviour' in their work and to regularly and critically reflect on the inherent asymmetrical nature of their relationships.

This self-reflection also underpinned AMERA's exceptional training programme.

All staff and volunteers received an induction in relevant Egyptian national law, the role of UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and the main nationalities of asylum seekers. Training in case management, referral between units (to ensure continuity of care), psychosocial support, data storage and interviewing – involving several weeks of shadowing and on-the-job feedback – were mandatory. By doing this AMERA emphasised the development of soft skills and interdisciplinary approaches to refugee protection. Importantly, AMERA sensitised local Egyptian volunteers on an otherwise largely invisible population.

Barbara's understanding of the intersections between gender-based violence (GBV) and claims for international protection also led to the establishment of a dedicated GBV team at AMERA, whose work included LGBTI refugees and male survivors of sexual violence. Barbara also saw a need for a special focus on the rights of refugee children, particularly in relation to birth registration, education, nutrition and appropriate accommodation. Every child referred to AMERA was assigned a child specialist caseworker who would involve them in therapeutic group activities and provide regular one-to-one counselling.

Community-based protection

Barbara focused on improving social realities for refugees, acknowledging the protracted nature of their situation in many camp and urban settings. According to Barbara: "UNHCR was never intended to become the world's largest welfare agency for displaced people: it was established to protect the rights of refugees.... and the protection of those rights necessitates an international effort to build a new infrastructure in the South."² This understanding led to a critique of

Refugee Status Determination (RSD) in some contexts like Egypt where recognition enables permanent residency but does not grant to refugees other rights laid out in the 1951 Refugee Convention, such as the right to work. For this reason, community-based protection and everyday activism became critical to the survival of Cairo's refugees and a core component of AMERA's activities.

AMERA's community outreach team supported community leaders to be seen and heard by UNHCR, in order to raise concerns or seek updates on cases. Meanwhile AMERA assisted community-based organisations (CBOs) – who provided emergency shelter and humanitarian assistance – to become as self-sufficient and resourceful as possible, including by supporting them in seeking independent financing. AMERA community outreach officers linked up to share best practices and carry out joint trainings for smaller and less-organised communities.

AMERA also recognised the value in learning from those with lived experience in order to improve its service. Refugee staff connected AMERA to the communities it served; they worked as interpreters, caseworkers and community outreach officers. Refugee staff were also able to flag difficult cases from their communities who were unable to reach the organisation. This sparked the idea of mobile clinics that would reach those refugees who could not reach AMERA, including persons with disabilities, the elderly and other at-risk groups living at the margins of Cairo's heaving metropolis.

AMERA's everyday activism

Cairo's dehumanising environment for refugees – despite their legal right to remain – propelled a daily activism among

AMERA staff in order to overcome regulatory or practical hurdles. This might entail accompaniment to health facilities to seek psychosocial support or to police stations

to seek a waiver to the common practice of not registering the births of children born to unmarried refugee mothers. For the most vulnerable, AMERA arranged for direct resettlement referrals to foreign embassies. Indeed, AMERA's behind-the-scenes work on detention, providing counselling and representation via telephone, provided a lifeline for many. Michael Kagan was right when he wrote: "AMERA tends not to bring high-profile cases in court, it rarely publishes reports, and its website is rudimentary. ...AMERA focuses instead on defending

human rights in practical terms, by helping refugees get recognized legal status, get a medical referral in an emergency, helping their children get into school, and so on."³

Through its advocacy, AMERA succeeded in influencing UNHCR's Cairo office to accept the accompaniment of AMERA legal advisors to RSD interviews at a time when many other UNHCR offices rejected it. The relationship between AMERA and UNHCR Cairo was a critical basis for UNHCR's eventual global recognition of the right to representation in its RSD procedures.⁴

Perhaps one of AMERA's greatest achievements was how it helped steer a multi-agency partnership with UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Psycho-Social Services and Training Institute in Cairo (PSTIC) and Caritas in identifying and responding to the needs of victims of human trafficking – a phenomenon that affected thousands of mostly Eritrean nationals from 2009–14. This multi-agency approach – widely



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considered to be best practice in the counter-trafficking sector – included a common protocol for sharing information and data, and the establishment of standard operating procedures designed to identify, refer, protect and seek solutions for victims over a defined time period. With AMERA's support, UNHCR and IOM Cairo managed to resettle around 400 refugee victims of human trafficking to Australia and the US.

While AMERA embodied many of Barbara's personal philosophies, after she left Cairo it became a force in its own right. This small NGO managed to carve out a new path for refugee advocacy and case management and demonstrated how platforms for innovative practice can drive and influence policy and institutional change. The story of AMERA also reminds us that the structures designed – and people employed – to provide refugee protection require constant

re-examination and self-reflection that must be informed by refugees' lived experience.

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This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of the agencies for which the authors now work.

1. This article is written in tribute to all AMERA staff and to the AMERA spirit that lives on in all of us, and we thank those colleagues and friends who supported its development.
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