

The challenge of humanitarian reform: linking scholarship to policy and practice



by Roger Zetter

During 2007 the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) has been celebrating the 25th anniversary of its foundation in 1982. We have been using the anniversary to highlight the rich variety of the Centre's achievements and activities and its unique contribution in pioneering the study of refugees and forced migration. Our celebrations include a special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* on methodologies of refugee research,¹ Forced Migration Online² podcast interviews with iconic founding figures in the field of refugee studies, exhibitions and workshops, and an international conference in December entitled 'An Unsettled Future? Forced Migration and Refugee Studies in the 21st Century'.³

For three interlinked reasons, this special issue of FMR, with its theme of humanitarian reform, is especially appropriate to celebrate our 25th Anniversary.

First, from its inception, the RSC has promoted humanitarian reform. At first, it courted controversy by challenging the accepted model and practice of humanitarianism represented by the assistance programmes of mainly northern NGOs, intergovernmental agencies and donors in the refugee crises of the 1970s and early 1980s in Africa, South East Asia and Central America. The RSC's early work questioned the uncritical acceptance of 'humanitarianism', even for those millions of forcibly displaced people on the margins of survival and in need of protection, by demonstrating the often negative impacts of assistance – refugee dependency, powerlessness and loss of autonomy, stereotyping refugees as helpless victims, undermining local coping capacities and civil society

structures, and generating inefficient and often unseemly competition between northern agencies in the humanitarian aid 'industry'.

However, the RSC's critique of humanitarian practice at that time was not just a privileged academic exercise in itself. A fundamental objective of the RSC – and this highlights a second reason for the relevance of this special issue – has been to use rigorous scholarship to improve the lives of millions of the most marginalised people in the world by shaping and influencing academic agendas in ways which can inform and enhance the policies and practices of agencies and practitioners in the field. Since the precepts of humanitarianism lie at the core of all our work, whether as academics or practitioners, the current theme of humanitarian reform and our response to those in need of humanitarian assistance reinforces the RSC's sustained contribution to these vital debates. Today, forced displacement is, if anything, more violent and widespread than it was a quarter of a century ago. Yet refugee participation, empowerment and 'agency', enhancing local capacity, the importance of accountability by those providing humanitarian assistance – highly controversial proposals when the RSC was conceived – are all now embedded, without question, in current humanitarian practice. In this respect humanitarian reform in general has been a sustained objective of the RSC. Humanitarian reform in the present context – as debated in this issue – builds on these essential achievements whilst addressing new challenges and structural requirements.

Translating these lessons into practice required new and innovative means of communication and this highlights

the third reason why this special issue resonates so closely with the RSC's work. Our reputation has been built on a strong commitment to developing clear and effective ways of connecting independent scholarship and research with the world of practice. We have prioritised global outreach, dialogue and cooperation between the worlds of academe and practice in unusual and effective ways. FMR, the most widely read publication in the field of refugees and forced migration, powerfully reflects our commitment to engage the world of policy making and to respond directly to the needs of local civil society organisations, international NGOs and intergovernmental and government agencies.

The past 25 years have witnessed an enormous growth in forced displacement, devastating the lives of millions of people and indirectly touching the lives of millions more. But, as much as the increasing numbers, it is the growing complexity of the social, political and economic causes and consequences of forced migration which pose profound challenges to states, international organisations and NGOs seeking to reform the ways in which they provide humanitarian assistance. Responding to these challenges demands continuing dialogue between good scholarship and practice – which the RSC and FMR will continue to deliver.

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1. For more information on this special issue, see: www.oxfordjournals.org/page/2967/1

2. www.forcedmigration.online

3. www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/PDFs/unsettled.pdf