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Learning curves and collaboration in reconceiving refugee settlements

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A collaboration between UNHCR, Ennead Architects and Stanford University uses settlement design to promote innovation and further development in the refugee protection model but collaborators initially face a steep learning curve.

Located in the hilly western edge of Rwanda, Kiziba refugee camp is home to some 16,000 refugees. Kiziba's population is young, with 50% of its residents under the age of 18. The children born within the camp have spent their entire lives there and have few prospects for a long-term solution. They are fortunate to have access to shelter, nutrition assistance and protection but, eighteen years after Kiziba was established, the camp still operates on foundations designed for short-term residency; food is rationed at a distribution point, the education system is stop-gap, refugees have minimal interaction with host communities, and livelihoods opportunities are small-scale and limited. When we visited in May 2013, UNHCR had just received permission from the government to replace the shelter roofs of plastic sheeting with sturdier, more permanent, iron ones.

In an ideal world, refugees would rarely if ever live in camps. Yet people who flee persecution and violence across borders routinely face staggering gaps in the refugee protection scheme and may end up living in camps for years, if not decades, while long-term resettlement, repatriation or local integration remain elusive goals. The average time a refugee spends in a camp now approaches 20 years, and 6.4 million of the world's 10.5 million refugees live in protracted refugee situations.¹ The complicated reality is that dedicated settlements will remain a part of the humanitarian landscape for some time.

In April 2012, UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner Alex Aleinikoff approached Stanford University as part of a broader effort to develop UNHCR's innovation agenda, with a focus on the planning, design and

administration of refugee settlements. Given the realities of protracted refugee situations, how could UNHCR build its capacity to negotiate difficult and time-constrained circumstances for creating settlements, and how might those settlements advance a more robust conception of refugee protection, self-sufficiency and well-being at a reasonable cost?

Stanford responded by developing several projects to support UNHCR within the context of the university's research and teaching mission. Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar of Stanford's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies formed multi-disciplinary working groups of students, researchers and professionals (including a group from Ennead Architects, working *pro bono*) who asked how UNHCR could rethink its design process and facilitate a camp's transitions over time.

Despite best intentions, the initial conversations between Stanford, Ennead, and UNHCR were often daunting. Participants brought to the project distinct cultures, experiences, norms and priorities. UNHCR staff were all too familiar with the intricate web of overlapping roles and responsibilities involved in setting up ostensibly temporary homes for newly arriving refugees but the picture was far more opaque to the architects and researchers. The UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies* has a mere 11 pages dedicated to planning strategies, and UNHCR often struggles to meet minimum Sphere standards during crisis response. Many site planners default to using a standard grid layout, which can be executed quickly in an emergency but can lead to long-term problems (for

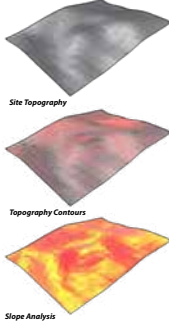
instance, poor drainage) when applied to topographically varied sites. To add to the operational complexity, camp planning has a significant political dimension; UNHCR management can negotiate with a host government for a site only to find that the allocated land is unusable or unsuitable.

Two years and three mission trips to refugee camps later, our concept has evolved into a flexible design toolkit that can be deployed in a variety of situations, including those where planners have limited time and resources to begin providing shelter and protection for arriving refugees.² In its current iteration, the toolkit aims to support UNHCR's contingency planning processes and to insert design features and considerations that prepare a camp for future modification. It comprises three main tools, which the participants continue to refine and expect to test further in the field.

The **Contingency Phase Mapping Tool** uses publicly available data and a list of critical drivers, ranging from topographical features to the size of the local population, to map potential settlement sites. Site planners would use the tool to quickly identify and filter viable sites before field visits, and to better plan for a given site's insufficiencies. UNHCR management would use the data during site negotiations with host governments and could link use of preferred sites with host government priorities, such as limited environmental impact. Crucially, the tool makes it more feasible for users to include long-term considerations – such as opportunities for refugee livelihoods and proximity to local services – in the site selection process itself. Unquestionably, political constraints and logistical challenges can pose difficulties

PROCESS: SITE ANALYSIS

During the contingency and emergency phases, site analysis (micro scale) can be used to reconcile what is known about the specific site content and the programmatic requirements of the camp. This answers: "What is the optimal use of each part of this site?" And "How much of the total site is actually useable?" A general program zoning plan can be developed for the site which clarifies areas most suitable for building shelters and infrastructure facilities and highlights areas of concern that are not suitable for building.



Example of site analysis tool, taken from *Toward a Unified Approach* (published April 2014) http://issuu.com/enneadarchitects/docs/toward_a_unified_approach-highres

but, nonetheless, by allowing planners to consider the interaction of site, design and the adjacent environment, the contingency mapping tool can help UNHCR and its partners make the best use of available options to support refugee self-sufficiency.

The **Site Layout Tool** uses publicly available data to identify usable land and plot the placement of shelters, communal facilities and marketplaces at a site-specific level. It aims to help planners move away from a standard grid model, and to create a camp with an immediate functional infrastructure that can be easily modified over time. As the camp grows older, this tool could plan additional features, such as a connective pathway between the camp and a neighbouring community to facilitate economic and social interaction.

The **Best Practices Database** would help site planners with specific problems quickly learn of methods used in other UNHCR settlements. It aims to provide inspiration to individual site planners and enable UNHCR to collect and retain institutional knowledge of actions in the field.

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The two-year collaboration has been an immense learning experience for the architects and researchers involved. Our first year was dedicated to familiarising ourselves with UNHCR's language, developing relationships throughout the organisation, and adjusting our approach to include the mix of flexibility and focus necessary to working successfully together. We grew increasingly familiar with the pace of work; key contacts would travel for weeks at a time with limited connectivity, and the mission trips critical to our work would often be coordinated at the very last minute. A planned pilot in Mugombwa, Rwanda, was indefinitely delayed when our staff contact moved to a new field office and UNHCR funding for the project did not come through. And while our

investment of time has allowed us to develop the trust and in-depth relationships necessary for significant innovation, our organisations require outcomes within the medium term. To date, Ennead has volunteered over \$200,000 of its time, and Stanford has similarly committed staff and resources to the project; a pilot or other tangible milestone is needed to help us continue our respective organisations' involvement in the project. With the help of a dedicated UNHCR liaison, our next steps will bring the Contingency Phase Mapping tool to a pilot phase by identifying a funding source and field site, and securing country-level UNHCR commitment to include our team in their contingency planning process.

Beyond the pilot, what might success mean in this context? At its core, the toolkit recognises that a refugee settlement's long-term social isolation and UNHCR- and partner-administered services can create a refugee population overly dependent on humanitarian aid and a local population resentful of refugees' comparatively higher standards of living.³ Our hope is that the toolkit will move camps toward a connected village model, where settlements have the capacity to support refugee interaction with neighbouring

communities through shared services such as hospitals, schools and marketplaces. The toolkit invites much-needed conversations on funding development initiatives within camps and on refugees' rights to movement and to work, while providing a framework for this discussion.

Empowering refugees to achieve economic self-sufficiency depends on far more than the existence of treaty provisions or even organisational support. Unquestionably, political constraints and logistical challenges can bedevil planning efforts for refugee livelihoods and better-functioning settlements, particularly given the constraints on settling refugees in urban areas or the choice of locations available for a settlement. By allowing planners to consider the interaction of site, design and the adjacent environment, these tools can help UNHCR and its partners support refugee self-sufficiency through best use of constrained options.

Against the large and complicated backdrop of humanitarian action, the toolkit is both an example of innovation within a humanitarian organisation, and an opportunity for actors involved in refugee response – from donor nations to host governments – to re-think the ingrained constraints that hobble a broader vision for refugee protection. Practical interventions such as the toolkit can create a space to question, test and innovate on these problems and, in time, may make the challenges ahead increasingly tractable.

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