

Innovation and refugee livelihoods: a historical perspective

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It is difficult to speak convincingly of 'new' or innovative practices towards refugees, especially in refugee livelihoods assistance, while there remains a significant gap in historical knowledge and institutional memory.

More than a decade ago Jeff Crisp wrote that "Since its inception...refugee studies has been notoriously ahistorical. Preoccupied with the latest emergency and with the plight of living people, researchers in this area of study have all too rarely looked into the past." This still rings true for the discipline, particularly in literature regarding refugee livelihoods and how to assist and 'innovate'. Without knowledge of past assistance practices we are unable to identify either truly novel innovations or those protracted challenges where innovation would be most beneficial.

Refugee livelihoods are currently discussed mainly as a self-evident concept or a new phenomenon altogether but research in the League of Nations, UN and International Labour Organisation archives, as well as the University of Oxford's Tristram F Betts grey literature collection, reveals that the main livelihoods assistance practices used today have been employed since the 1920s. These practices include agricultural production in settlements, vocational training and micro-finance. The evolution of terms, such as micro-finance instead of revolving funds, demonstrates more of a repackaging than true innovation. A drastic change is evident, however, in the administration and implementation of these practices – from bottom-up to top-down – which suggests that it is the **structure** of livelihoods assistance that needs innovation more than **what** is being provided.

The years between the two world wars saw the emergence of a participatory refugee regime through the League of Nations. Partly due to budget constraints the League had a strict 'no-charity' philosophy that required

the participation of refugees in their own resettlement. Reports from the 1920s detail the creation of both urban and rural refugee settlements in countries such as Greece and Bulgaria where agricultural production, vocational training and small loans and revolving funds were successfully employed to support refugees' self-reliance as well as to boost host-country development. Refugees became employees and delegates of the Nansen International Office for Refugees, construction workers for settlements, and benefactors of refugee livelihoods through paying for a Nansen Passport; this money then went into a revolving loan scheme to help refugees establish livelihoods.

This participatory approach changed drastically after World War II. The advent of large-scale foreign-led development projects meant that settlement was no longer funded or co-led by refugees but by organisations and institutions. In stark contrast to settlement efforts in the interwar years, where employed staff were largely host-country nationals or refugees, the 'experts' employed by the UN and other organisations were mainly Westerners, and an increased emphasis on host countries' national development led to the production of cash crops in settlements.

Overwhelmingly negative reports about many East African refugee settlements cite a highly authoritarian administration that constrained refugees' livelihoods strategies and reduced the potential self-reliance of the settlements. Refugees were often forced to disregard their own knowledge and skills in order to adhere to settlement stipulations, and were even punished for pursuing livelihoods other than farming. Concomitant with the top-down

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structure of settlements at this time was the limited knowledge of those foreign 'experts' as well as the ill-fitting nature of the technical 'innovations' they brought with them.

In some cases, the failed rural settlements of the 1960s and 1970s have become the refugee camps of today, with many practical challenges persisting. An examination of long-term Sudanese refugees in Uganda in 2006¹ discusses problems of soil quality and inadequate settlement plot size – precisely the same issues reported for the same population in Uganda in the 1960s. In 2010 UNHCR cited 'lack of early planning' as a major issue in responding to displacement, echoing the lack of soil testing and settlement planning of previous decades.

The post-war assistance approach resulted in a lack of leadership expertise in various areas and a lack of displaced community involvement that persist today. In the case of micro-finance, this has led to programme failings, although a notable adaptation – or innovation – has also been the seeking of outside support, such as UNHCR's 2010

Memorandum of Understanding with the Grameen Bank. While a discourse of refugee capability is widely employed, much of the innovation implemented is reminiscent of post-war administration in that it is still driven by actors other than refugees themselves.

Although innovation by way of adaptation to new situations and emerging technologies is present within refugee assistance, history suggests that innovation in the case of the main livelihoods assistance practices largely does not mean the creation of something new. It is instead their structure and implementation that have changed. Focusing on refugee livelihoods with this understanding may be one of the most innovative forms of assistance yet.

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1. Kaiser T (2006) 'Between a camp and a hard place: rights, livelihood and experiences of the local settlement system for long-term refugees in Uganda', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 44.4. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/3693/1/BetweenACampAndAHardPlace.pdf>