

# Resettlement: where's the evidence, what's the strategy?

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**The aims and objectives of resettlement are poorly specified and the outcomes are poorly measured. For resettlement to be effective, it needs a much stronger evidence base and it needs improved coordination at the international level.**

Resettlement is an area of refugee policy that too often escapes scrutiny. It is often viewed as inherently benevolent and serves as a means for distant countries and progressive members of civil society to believe that they are 'making a difference'. And yet, relative to its historical and cultural primacy in major resettlement countries such as the United States (US), Canada and Australia, resettlement's purpose and outcomes often evade debate or examination.

Many of the more recent European resettlement policies emerged as knee-jerk responses to the European refugee 'crisis'. For example, the UK's Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme was extended to 20,000 Syrians for one reason alone: the day after the body of the Syrian refugee child Alan Kurdi was depicted on the front page of every British newspaper, resettlement had become the answer.

The purpose of resettlement is specified with surprising vagueness. It is supposedly a protection tool, a durable solution, a means to strategically leverage other durable solutions, and a form of burden sharing and

international solidarity. Yet the impact of resettlement is almost never measured relative to any of these putative purposes. Because aims and objectives are often so imprecisely specified, there are no benchmarks or metrics to hold governments accountable for their resettlement practices or to measure what resettlement actually achieves. It is no wonder that it is so challenging for politicians to justify to electorates.

A few provocative facts hint at why there are at least valid concerns to consider. Resettlement is consistently only available to the few: it is offered to less than 1% of the world's refugees. It is often not what refugees want: 70% of around 100,000 Syrian refugees approached by UNHCR about resettlement to Canada in late 2015 said they did not want resettlement to Canada. It leads to inequitable allocation of resources: we spend around US\$135 on every refugee in the West for every US\$1 we spend on a refugee in developing regions of the world.<sup>1</sup>

So why do Western states persevere with resettlement? Why is it the default means by which a country like the US supports

refugees? There are many reasons. Some are cultural and historical, with some countries and regions having long-standing commitments to resettlement. But there is also an underlying political economy. The 'resettlement industry' is worth billions of dollars a year to the NGOs and civil society organisations that participate in it. In the US there is a significant amount of lobbying – much of it faith-based – in state capitals and in Washington DC to advocate for resettlement places, including for specific groups. Resettlement feels good and it feels cathartic.

But resettlement also increasingly serves an unspoken migration management function. It legitimates certain modes of entry for some refugees, and it delegitimizes others. It is no coincidence that it is in some of the countries with the strongest resettlement traditions where spontaneous asylum is regarded with the greatest scepticism. In Australia, for example, those who arrive spontaneously are referred to as 'queue jumpers'.

None of this is an argument not to engage in resettlement. Resettlement represents a potentially important part of the toolbox for protecting and assisting refugees. It potentially fulfils all of the functions that UNHCR associates it with. But what has been missing is a knowledge base that can empirically substantiate what it is that the umbrella category of 'resettlement' is achieving. Who is it actually helping – beyond sustaining the resettlement industry – and on what basis? As resettlement is gradually reconceptualised more broadly as 'pathways', these questions become ever more urgent.

### Improving the evidence base

Compared with other areas of refugee studies, there has been a striking lack of research on resettlement. It is one of the least evidence-based areas of refugee policy, led more by belief, habit and culture. Too often resettlement policies are built on historical precedent and effective lobbying, rather than on clearly defined objectives and carefully understood pathways to impact.

Resettlement's detractors often resort to empirically unsubstantiated claims: that it is a 'pull factor', attracting migrants to

host countries in the region of origin, and that humanitarian assistance in the region provides a more efficient alternative to resettlement. Resettlement's proponents make claims that, for example, resettlement reduces spontaneous arrivals of asylum seekers beyond the region of origin and that it reinforces the commitment of host countries in the developing world's to asylum norms. Few of these claims – on either side – are necessarily wrong; it is just that they have not been tested.

Successive UNHCR documents have highlighted the range of functions served by resettlement. And yet there has been very little research to show whether, and if so when, resettlement actually fulfils these different types of objectives. But with research, these putative functions could be tested empirically. All of the goals of resettlement correspond to specific, testable hypotheses:

Function of resettlement + example of testable hypothesis
International solidarity and responsibility sharing : <i>influences host state behaviour</i>
Protection : <i>reaches the most vulnerable</i>
Strategic use : <i>leverages other durable solutions</i>
Public understanding : <i>leads to greater public support</i>
Addressing mass arrivals : <i>averts refoulement by host states</i>

To date, research on resettlement has focused mainly on three broad areas. First, descriptive accounts of the evolution of resettlement policy. Second, work on the social integration of resettled refugees. Third, cultural dimensions of the resettlement experience. The existing body of work has left key gaps in important areas. Methodologically, there has been limited quantitative or comparative research that can inform practice. Thematically, there are gaps. The politics has rarely been examined: how does the 'resettlement industry' function, and what are the power relations and interests that sustain existing practices, globally, nationally

and locally? The economics requires more work: what explains variation in outcomes for resettled refugees? Anthropologically, most of the existing work is country-specific rather than seeking to understand resettlement by tracing refugees' trajectories through the entire resettlement process.

### Improving coordination

In addition, good resettlement policies require international collaboration if they are to be effective. Most countries' resettlement contributions are a drop in the ocean by themselves; collectively they have a greater chance of making a difference. Yet resettlement is not well enough coordinated at the international level. Beyond UNHCR's Annual Tripartite Consultations, most states make their resettlement commitments to UNHCR on a bilateral basis and fail to coordinate their resettlement policies. This means that the aggregate of contributions from resettlement fails to exceed the sum of its parts.

To be effective, resettlement cannot be conceived as a discrete element of the overall refugee regime but needs to be an integral component part of a wider strategic vision. It has to be a part of comprehensive responses to specific refugee situations around the world, considered alongside responses within host states in the developing world and within the country of origin. But until now, no such overarching strategy has existed, and resettlement conversations have been more about the politics of the resettlement country than about coherent responses to specific refugee situations.

The first thing that is needed is a collective purpose for resettlement. The most obvious and unique function of resettlement is as a route out of limbo. With the exception of the most vulnerable, it is arguably justifiable for refugees to wait in a neighbouring country in their region of origin for a certain period of time. But beyond a certain period – whether five or 10 years – it becomes cruel and inhumane. Within a comprehensive response, resettlement might be most appropriately used as part of that 'route out of limbo' function through which the international community coordinates an end to protracted refugee situations.

The second thing that is needed, though, is a more proactive resettlement 'broker'. At the moment, individual governments determine their resettlement priorities and UNHCR supports them in meeting these objectives. Far more coherent would be a UNHCR-led strategic vision for resettlement as a component part of comprehensive responses to specific refugee situations. A logical place for the elaboration of such a role might well be within the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework<sup>2</sup> being developed as part of the Global Compact process.

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1. Betts A and Collier P (March 2017) *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*, Penguin Allen Lane
2. New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, A/RES/71/1, Annex 1, para. 18 <http://bit.ly/NewYorkDeclaration>



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