

Refugee Assistance and Development A Search for Self-Reliance

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Abstract : *Refugees are one of the major problems facing the international community today. Now a days the number of refugees are increasing for various reasons. As the number of refugees increased the strategies for addressing this problem become the prime concern of the international community. The main thrust of this article is to find out whether there is any scope to able the refugee people self-reliant while they awaits in the camp. It is the view of the author that refugee problem is no more short-term and that the present efforts to alleviate refugee problems is inadequate both in terms of quality and quantity as well as vision for self-reliance.*

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s there was great optimism that the end of the Cold War might also result in the end of the global 'refugee cycle'. Cold War analyses of refugee displacements often highlighted the 'escape' from communism as the principal motive for refugee movements in the north. They tended to explain refugee-generating conflicts in the South in terms of wars conducted by proxy by the two superpowers (Suhrke and Zolberg 1989). In reality though, the global refugee population increased substantially immediately after the end of the Cold War, from about 14.9 million in 1990 to 17.2 million in 1991 (UNHCR 1995a). In the document UNHCR strategy towards 2000 (Geneva, 1997) the primary challenge facing the UNHCR was said to be the fact that "population displacements are more than ever perceived as a threat to economic, social and environmental stability, as well as political security"(UNHCR, 1995: 14). Because of the international and national politics and socio-economic reason the number of refugee is increasing, they are living in the refugee camp sometimes generation after generation without any hope for future.

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The main objective of this article is to review and assess the assumptions and strategies involved in addressing refugee movements on the basis of existing literature. It is argued that the operational mechanisms of the current international response to refugee movements is based upon the assumptions that refugee problem are short term and temporary, are no longer appropriate. The article will try to find out whether there is any scope to able the refugee people self-reliant while they awaits in the refugee camp.

Who are Refugees

In order to develop an appropriate refugee assistance program/strategies, it is important to understand who the refugees are and what are the conditions that forced them to become refugees. The use of the word "refugee" can be very confusing. It is very hard to find a well-defined definition of the term refugee. A sociological definition of refugees has been developed by some social scientists. "A refugee is person who involuntarily under great duress, and typically for political reasons" (Suhrke, 1983:162).

For a better understanding and complete definition of refugee we can cite UN definition regarding refugees. According to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of Refugees, the term 'refugee' shall apply to any persons who,

"owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the country" (Amberg, 1988 :12).

Causes of Refugee Outflows

Refugees are one of the major problems facing the international community today. The causes of refugeeism are complex and people flee their countries for a wide variety of reasons such as persecution, for racial, political, or religious beliefs. War, armed conflict and repression for political, ethnic, racial or religious reasons are the usual causes behind the movement of refugees.

Refugees are very often the by-product, and sometimes the intended result, of the political leaders wielding power without regard to the rights of its citizens. Within the body of literature on migration there exist a number of theories to explain why people move. However, there is no such theory geared specifically towards refugees. According to Mr. Zia Rizbi,

“ Armed conflicts between and within countries occasioned by the sale of arms from the developed to the underdeveloped countries (today two million dollars per minute are spent on arms), resulting in displaced populations and a devastation of resources. The speaker noted however, that at least 75 per cent of refugees come from border areas, where conflicts were frequent.” (1989:8).

Organization for Refugee Assistance and their Limitations

There are three major actors who deal with refugee problems. They are the United Nations High Commissions for Refugees (UNHCR), Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and national governments. They provide legal protection, emergency relief, ongoing assistance and resettlement aid. This constitutes the international response to refugees. A very fundamental problem is that many of the agencies working as operational partners of UNHCR have very little prior experience with refugees or the services they are providing (Cuny, 1981). In this section, I want to discuss the main features and strategies used by the UNHCR and other assisting agencies in order to find out limitation or weakness of the existing machinery.

Within the international system of relief efforts the UNHCR is the major agency working with refugees. The original purpose of UNHCR was to offer protection to refugees from the crises of World War II, placing them in camps until they were permanently resettled (McLean, 1983). Since then, it has become the major recipient and disburser of international funds contributed by governments for refugees (McLean, 1983). It is possible to identify a number of major flaws in the design and implementation of the UNHCR program, This has undoubtedly impacted negatively on its

overall success. The major weakness in the planning process, which is based on faulty assumption that refugee problems, are temporary. For most of the past 50 years, the UNHCR has been at the core of assisting refugees with a parochial vision. UNHCR operates within resettlement and repatriation solutions that are all restorative.

Although the UNHCR dominates the refugee assistance program it is itself an extremely weak organization, with a limited capacity for managing donor agencies and directing change in their attitude. UNHCR is thus in no position to challenge the policies of its funders. Moreover, UNHCR has no authority to carry over any action on the refugee producing government. It also has no financial power to launch any development projects independently. As the UNHCR is financially dependent on the state therefore, the state always maintain a dominant role over UNHCR's policies and programs. As Adelman mentioned,

“critical theorists like political realists, argue that the UNHCR is simply a pawn of state and hence, capitalist interests. As such, the UNHCR is a conflicted organization torn between its legal and human rights obligations and its cow towing to the Western states that pay its bills. The critical theories agree with the realists that the UNHCR is not an independent actor but is subject to the interest of the powerful states that it serves” (Adelman, 2001: 10).

The UNHCR was created by western governments to see their interest in refugee field. The gap between relief and development in the UN system is well known (Rogers and Copeland 1993). The necessity, as well as the difficulties, of expanding relief and humanitarian assistance to include attention to capacity building and sustainable development has been increasingly debated within the UN system.

Generally, though, NGOs are believed to operate much more efficiently than government and international agencies because they are smaller and have less complex organizational structures. They also typically react more quickly to events, work more at the grassroots level, and operate mainly along humanitarian rather than politicoeconomic lines. However, NGOs now face criticisms

similar to those of other institutions. These include their tendency to provide inappropriate aid, to engage in intra and inter agency rivalries, and to not coordinate their activities (Harrell-Bond 1985, 1986; Mazur 1987, 1988; Pitlerman 1985).

Problem with Coordination

Coordination problem in the refugee field has a long history, including the evolution of the fragmentary and overlapping sets of entities established to deal with refugees. One major feature of the multilateral humanitarian assistance is the multiplicity of actors involved. On the donor side there are global and regional intergovernmental agencies, national governments of different sizes and shapes, and a plethora of non-governmental organization (NGOs) that are important conduits of assistance to the field. In fact, NGOs have become an integral part of the refugee regime and a deep mutual dependence has developed between them and UNHCR (Zetter, 1999). In reality, the actions of these multiple agencies are seldom effectively coordinated and they may even undermine each other. As Eldridge mentioned, "We can no longer go along our uncoordinated ways, each of us in his own path. Sometimes unwittingly in competition with one another. The time has come for those of us concerned with problem to create a plan, manpower plan" (1967: 66) Recently, the agency has examined the impact of funding shortages, problems in funding mechanisms and put emphasis on the need for coordination of repatriation, rehabilitation and development services in repatriation programs. UNHCR, in its Framework for the Plan of Operation for Repatriation and Reintegration of Mozambican Refugees said.

"There will be a need for a highly coordinated inter-agency approach throughout both planning and implementation of what we hope will be a comprehensive (reintegration) program A very clear understanding between all of the various actors in the rehabilitation process.... Clear linkages should be developed to ensure smooth transition from relief to development activities" (Hiram 1993: 28)

Phases of Refugee Assistance

The world community has attempted to deal with massive refugee flows in a variety of ways, seeking to ease the plight of the refugees or to relieve the pressure on countries of settlement while searching for solutions to deal with the root causes as well. Between the time that a refugee arrives in host country and a solution to the problem is found, refugee situations and the international response to them can be conceived of as passing through a series of stages. Dewy identified five refugee phases:

“1) pre-emergency; 2) emergency 3) post emergency; 4) durable solutions; and 5) development. The initial phase is pre-emergency in character during which the first signs of refugee movements begin to appear. The next phase is characterized by the need for emergency relief. As refugee situations evolve, they tend to pass through a third, post emergency phase of care and maintenance, often with an emphasis on refugee self-reliance. But in most cases, efforts are made to find a lasting solutions such as voluntary repatriation, local settlement..... The fifth and final stage of a refugee situation..... consists of integration of refugees or reintegration of returnees into the development process of the host country or the country of origin, respectively (Dewy 1984, cited in Gorman, 1985, Quoted in Amberg 1988: 39).

Though theoretically there are five stages of refugee assistance program practically the UNHCR and other NGOs are confined themselves with the primary stages. As Amberg mentioned,

“It is theoretically possible for UNHCR and NGO’s to be very active in each of the five phases. Practically their involvement is usually limited to the emergency phase. This is due to the fact that the existing models for assisting refugees are based on outdated assumptions that problem are temporary and that refugees come from industrialized countries. Emergency relief is geared towards providing for refugees under these short-term conditions ‘ (Amberg, 1988:40).

In Search for Development Oriented Refugee Assistance

The general meaning of development is pattern of regeneration through one's own effort for fighting against dominance and dependence. It means gaining the strength, confidence and vision to work for positive changes. In the field of refugee work, development means refugee's social and economic capacity to withstand and surmount pressure on their lives and ways of life. It means vulnerabilities are reduced and capacities are increased so that refugee people can manage themselves without the help of external agencies. The basic philosophy of development is based on the capacity building of the refugee so that they can participate fully and fairly in shaping their vision of a healthy society.

The concept of refugee aid and development emerged in the late 1970s (it has earlier roots) precisely because of the failures of the traditional refugee assistance system that was narrowly focused on life-sustaining, relief-oriented refugee assistance. What was apparent then was that giving only relief and emergency assistance to refugees leads to dependency, a life in limbo and a heavy burden on the least-developed countries. Failure to pursue a durable solution means that life-sustaining, care and maintenance assistance becomes open ended and expensive. The international community has adopted a series of principles, declarations conclusions and reports which address the issue of the desirability of development-oriented assistance program. Unfortunately, despite all these efforts, the concept of refugee aid and development is still ill defined. (Barry N. Stein 1994).

From the previous discussion it is evident that there are many organizations providing refugee assistance, but their focus is very limited only confined with the humanitarian relief assistance. Their outlook is very parochial rather than panoramic. The organization of international refugee assistance is based upon the false assumption that refugee situations are short-term. "The UNHCR and international NGOs have traditionally responded to refugee crises by providing short-term emergency relief. They continue to do so today" (Amberg, 1988:68)

For a long term solution of the refugee problem some critical issues must be understood and addressed. By the end of the 1970s, the states most directly concerned with the refugee problem in developing regions were beginning to consider the need for alternative models of assistance. Countries of asylum, many of them affected by the related ills of political instability, the global recession and economic mismanagement, stressed the need for 'international burden sharing' so that they could cope with the adverse impact of refugees. Because when refugees used to come in a state it impose an impact on host countries economy especially on its infrastructures, environment and disadvantaged groups. So it became a great challenge for host countries to manage the problem. They lack the infrastructure, administrative set-up, resources, logistics and experience to bear the extra load. Gorman has summarized that perception,

"There was increasingly a realization that large numbers of refugees, often spontaneously settled in poor countries, could quickly outpace the host country's economic and social infrastructures. In some cases, such as Pakistan, the very relief operation itself caused a deterioration in roads, which were subjected to continuous relief convoys of heavy trucks laden with relief supplies. In arid regions, such as Sudan and Somalia, the massive concentration of refugee populations led to widespread deforestation and desertification"(Gorman, 1993: 103)

So, the extra pressure should be shared by the international community by launching development projects focusing on the upliftment of both host country and refugee as well. Long term, as well as short term programs, can be launched for integrated and comprehensive development so that they become self-reliant rather than dependent. On the basis of previous experience RAD (Refugee Assistance and Development) suggests that assistance programs should have a holistic outlook. According to UNRISD suggestions to obtain balance and short term labor intensive projects as well as long term capital intensive projects, so that people from all walks of life can get benefit from the projects.

What to Do to Bridge the Gap

In connectin with appropriate development strategies, UNRISD has suggested an approach that achieves a better balance between humanitarian and development assistance;

“it is important to achieve a better balance between short-term humanitarian assistance and development aid by channeling more resources toward small-scale community based projects and quick impact assistance designed to rehabilitate agricultural production and essential social services. Long term development assistance focus less on large scale capital intensive projects and more on human” (1993:250).

The overall strategies for self-reliance focused development strategies should have two phases, as mentioned an Emergency Operation Committee,

“in the transitory or short-term phase, projects with immediate impact promoting the transition from emergency to development will be crucial. Projects in this phase should focus upon food services and income generation. In the second, or consolidation phase, emphasis should be on strengthening the absorption capacity and economy of the returnee areas and diversifying the economy. This phase should form a bridge with the transitory phase focusing on agriculture, education, health, water supply, income and employment generation” (1992 m: 4).

In order to develop the fate of refugees there needs to be implement a number of projects. The question is, who will operate the projects? The funding agency or state wants to send their own officials to look after the project activities because they want to utilize their money in an appropriate manner as most host countries have no experience on how to run the projects efficiently and also lack managerial skills. Moreover, there are many third world countries that have other problems such as misappropriation of project money, red-tapism and bureaucracy. So this raises the question of misunderstandings and mistrust. In order to solve these problems NGOs can come ahead with assistance. But many NGOs also have no professional or skilled personnel to tackle the situation. To overcome the problem an organization can be formed comprised of experts from civil society, donor countries, representative from host countries and people from target groups. So that their better participation and coordination can be ensured.

Previous experience shows that many projects failed to achieve its goal lack of people's participation. It is evident that when beneficiaries participate at the beginning of the project cycle, when project design decision are made, the projects objectives are more likely to include beneficiary empowerment. Because participation building the beneficiary capacity, confidence, increased project effectiveness, and improved project efficiency.

"experience gained in the field suggests that instead of determining the infrastructure and economic base of a settlement from outside the refugee communities it is more appropriate and advantageous to design them with the full participation of the refugees, drawing on their capacity for creative innovation and imagination. The virtual exclusion of refugees from any meaningful participation cost beyond the financial means of the refugees and their host-countries, are among the main constraints on the achievement of self-reliance" (Peter Noble, 1987: 98)

Are the Long-term Development Programs More Cost-effective?

For long-term development there will need extra money to implement the projects. There are some donors who feel reluctant and try to avoid the long-term development strategy. The donors are willing to fund short-term low-budget projects but not long-term development programs. It is true that long-term development programs are expensive to implement, but the benefits to refugees greatly outweigh these costs. Increasing economic self-reliance has many advantages. If the refugees can provide for themselves, the burden to the international community, will be eased. Providing opportunities for self sufficiency costs less than continually satisfying basic needs through assistance programs. The psychological effects of promoting a sense of responsibility improves the refugee's self image and makes it easier for them to deal with their situation. As Ruiz mentioned "though the long term assistance program needs more money and it is expensive but in the long run it is cost-effective"(1993:27).

I can mention Eritrean refugee as well as Ethiopian, Uganda and Chad's refugee in Sudan. During the Eritrean struggle for liberation

from Ethiopia- over one quarter of Eritrea's population became refugees. The majority, as many as 500,000 people, sought asylum in Sudan, where some have now been for up to thirty years (Kibreab 1996b). Since independence in 1956, Sudan have been challenged by flows of refugees from Zaire, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Chad. By 1984 there were 700,000 refugee's in the country compared to 35,000 in 1967 (Karadawi, A. 1999: 1) "and helping returnees and their country, work towards self-sufficiency is also more cost-effective than forcing them to remain dependent on emergency relief programs and foreign aid" (Hiram A. Ruiz, 1993: 27)

Do the Political Interest of Donors Affect Assistance Strategy?

The refugee issue is politically loaded and involves many parties in complex sets of power relations. Political tensions between refugee providing and refugee receiving countries may hamper efforts to assist refugees. Since refugee assistance is almost entirely provided by rich donor countries, it is prone to the vagaries of the political interests of such donors. UNRISD has aptly articulated this problem: "the political problem is that long-term development programs are not only more expensive than humanitarian assistance, but funding for them is even more dependent on the perceived political self-interest of donors" (1993:18-19). Refugees have been used to serve foreign policy concerns in many situations. Using the United States as an example Loescher observed,

"refugees from Eastern Europe, Cuba and China have been generously welcomed by the United States. These refugees represent to the U.S the concrete failings of communist countries. Loescher also points out that refugees have been used to undermine and destabilize enemy regimes. In the case of some Southern African countries, refugees have been provided arms and supported their struggle (1987:330).

The United States has had in influence on and supported events in Guatemala through its military and police training programs, sales and donations of arms, weapons, helicopters and other vehicles used in warfare, spare parts etc, and technical assistance and financial aid (Sante, 1983).

Some Examples of Refugee Self-management and Self-reliance

The concept of self-reliance means self-confidence, reliance primarily on one's own human and natural resources, and the capacity for autonomous goal-getting and decision making. Self reliance primarily means the capacity for income to cover minimum household requirements such as, food, clothing bedding and shelter. In 1982, UNHCR devised a standard definition of the relative concepts of 'self-sufficiency' and self-reliance' based on three parameters.

"The first parameter for self-sufficiency was the surplus production of staple food crop. Basic food guaranteed, the second parameter for self-reliance was 'family self-reliance.' This meant that having achieved self-sufficiency in food, a refugee family should be able to generate from other sources enough income to cover minimum household requirements such as additional food, clothing, bedding and shelter. The third parameter was the settlement's self-reliance" (Johnson and Cree 1982, quoted in Karadawi, 1999 : 198).

In the discussion of refugees the concept of self-reliance means "the capacity of refugees to provide for their own economic support and the support of their families" (Martin and Copeland, 1988a:1).

It is very hard to make the refugee people self-reliant in refugee camps. Moreover, the aid agencies are not interested in making the refugee people self-reliant as it takes more money in their language. In spite of this fact some attempts at helping refugees to become self-reliant while awaiting repatriation have been made in Africa and Central America and the output was somewhat optimistic. This ushers a ray of hope and provides new direction about the rethinking of refugee assistance. At least three examples exist where refugee people became self-reliant with the assistance of international and national assistance agencies. In Honduras, the quest for durable solutions has concentrated on food production. One camp managed to grow some of their own food needs. As UNHCR mentioned,

“the camp [Mesa grande, Honduras] covers 100% of its own population’s needs in fresh vegetables [.....] April’s yield alone was nearly 50 metric tons. Out of the camps fish ponds came seven tons of fish per year. Other locally produced sources of protein include chickens (3, 500 distributed per month) and pigs (60 per month). Considering space constraints and the fact that nearly two thirds of Mesa Gande’s Population are less than 14 years old, these are impressive figures [....] they will never come close to meeting the basic needs of 11,000 persons” (UNHCR 1985: 28)

There was also a sign of self-sufficiency in Guatemalan refugees residing in two camps Compache and Quintana Roo settlements. As Amberg mentioned, “the condition, of the quintana Roo and Compeche refugees are somewhat better. The basic infrastructure in the settlement runs smoothly [.....] there is no doubt that the Compeche and Quintana Roo settlements qualify as an attempt at a self-reliance. UNHCR is pleased with the developments taking place in this area” (Amberg 1988: 108,128).

“in the early 1980s, as a brutal civil war swept through El Salvador, thousands of people sought refugee in neighboring Honduras.....Soon, with a couple of sewing machines and material given by a local church agency, they began teaching others how to make shirts, trousers and dresses. Nine years later, every single item of clothing including underwear, hats and shoes was manufactured within the camp, in collective workshops which boasted 150 semi-industrial machines and 240 trainees, virtually all of them were women and youngsters” (Deborah Eade 1997 :188).

Some Recommendations for Future Action

A solution to the problem of long-term dependency on refugee assistance lies in changing the focus of assistance from relief to development oriented strategy. At present refugees receive assistance from the UNHCR, host government and NGOs. The pattern of assistance is based first, on treating situations as emergencies. Development oriented refugee assistance is seen as a positive step because it is aimed at lessening the burden the

refugees may cause to a host country. The concept of durable solutions was developed by and accepted at the 1984 executive committee meeting of UNHCR (UNHCR, 1984). Clark and Stein (1985: 14) summarize the principles, which arise from the meeting:

- “1. Refugee problem demands durable solution because failure to act early means prolonged suffering, increase dependence, and higher cost to host's and the international community.
2. From the outset there is a need to avoid dependence and promote refugee productivity through self-help activities, engagement in food or other agricultural production, employment and other economically productive activities.
3. However, often no solutions are at hand, because in low-income countries sufficient jobs or readily cultivable land are not available. Therefore the only alternative to permanent dependence on relief is to create income-generating opportunities on a large scale.
4. The focus of refugee assistance must change from short-term emergency relief to long-term solutions, which allow for refugees to become self-reliant”.

Skilled development program can enhance refugee's creativity so funds currently used to maintain refugees in camps should be used for appropriate vocational training programs and job creation program for refugees and host country populations. In the refugee camp women, aging people, and children are more vulnerable so special program should be geared up to help these groups. In order to bridge the existing gaps between refugee and development structure, there needs to be closer coordination to ensure that assistance to refugees complemented development oriented assistance. In this context, UNDP can play a central role in the coordination, implementation and monitoring of refugee-related infrastructure projects. NGOs can also play a role in the assessment, planning and execution of development-oriented projects. In addition, UNHCR can play a leading role in relief and

post-relief activities. Above all, it is clear that a change in attitude towards refugee assistance is needed, UNHCR and other international agencies must change the focus of their assistance programs from emergency relief to development oriented assistance.

Conclusion

Through careful analysis of material it became clear that present efforts to alleviate refugee problems is inadequate both in terms of quality and quantity as well as the vision for refugee self-reliance. There is tendency among all the development partners that increased assistance to refugees is a panacea that can only improve their socio-economic condition. Even though material assistance is crucial, it is not the only variable on which the alleviation of the economic and social plight of the refugees depends. There should be an approach, which seeks to call upon the creativity, the energy and activity of the people themselves to work for the defence of their rights and to adopt measures best suited to their respective needs. According to the Geneva Convention, refugees have the 'right' to protection and humanitarian aid. In order to transform the refugees from a liability to an asset and to enable them to become an important factor in the process of development, the participation of the refugees must be ensured. So that the refugees are able to become productive members of the community by putting into practice their creativity and productivity. By the above discussion it is clear that there is need to improve and strengthen the refugee assistance machinery in order to cope better with the present situation, as well as to be able to meet future eventualities.

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