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Are refugee camps good for children?

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Introduction¹

Today, camps have become almost synonymous with the refugee experience. The most essential feature of a camp is the authoritarian character of their administration; they are like 'total institutions', places where, as in prisons or mental hospitals, everything is highly organized, where the inhabitants are depersonalized and where people become numbers without names.

Another characteristic of camps, especially those where people have no access to land, is the persistent shortage of food. For example, the normal prevalence of acute malnutrition in various African countries is said to be between three per cent and five per cent. In nine camps in Sudan, the Centres for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia, found the acute malnutrition of children under five varied between 20 per cent and 70 per cent!

There is now much evidence that refugee camps are not good for anyone. No-one freely chooses to move into a refugee camp to stay. Everyone who can gets out of them as quickly as possible. This is why there are almost always more refugees living among their hosts outside of camps. One way or another, and wherever possible, these refugees have become 'integrated' into the host society. We also know that where refugees can get land, or are not restricted in movement and are able to find employment, they are better off than those living in camps. Moreover, they are not just using the resources of host institutions, they are also contributing to their host's economy.

The origins of the refugee camp

If no-one wants to live in camps and life in camps is not only unhealthy for children but for everyone, we are faced with two questions: where did the idea of camps for refugees come from in the first place and whose interests do they serve?

To answer the first question, we need to look back in history to the beginnings of Africa's independence. As we all know, in pre-independence Africa, the economic exploitation of the continent was often justified on the grounds that colonialism was good for Africans. Education and religion were the instruments for what Europeans believed they were up to, that is, 'civilizing' the continent.

After the Second World War, as Africans gradually gained their independence, and with representatives of independent African states filling the seats at the UN, it was no longer politically correct to use such terms such as 'primitive' or 'backward'. A new vocabulary had to be developed to describe the poverty of the continent and to disguise the racism of the rich countries of the world. This vocabulary is still used today to describe the relationship of Africa compared to the north: 'underdeveloped'

¹ This paper was originally an oral presentation, delivered at the Continental Conference on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict, a ministerial level meeting of the OAU, sponsored by the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) in July 1997.

or 'developing'. The evolutionary beliefs embedded in contemporary thinking are also revealed through references to the 'third' versus the 'first' world.

In the period following the Second World War, a theory called modernization set out to explain just why it was that Africa remained so poor. From this time, explicitly or implicitly, modernization theory has underpinned donors' approaches to international aid and has informed the policies of organisations such as the World Bank. Unfortunately, it has also informed the policies of many African governments.

Underlying this theory has been the understanding that modernization (i.e. economic growth) would require a total revolution of African societies, of their values, their social organisation, and of the way Africans earned their living. For example, agriculture would have to be mechanized to be efficient.

A basic tenet of modernization theory was that progress will come more quickly when people have been uprooted than in situations where new methods are introduced in a settled area. In short, being forced out is good for you because uprooting people creates the conditions which makes them more open to learning and accepting new ideas. As the theory goes, when people move to new areas they are more receptive to new ideas than if they remain in familiar surroundings.²

Uprooting people and congregating them in a new place also creates the conditions that would make sure they learn. Even those resistant to change can be forced to adapt by making this learning or adaptation a condition of their survival. As the theory goes, when people are under pressure to move (or are clever enough to see its advantages), they can be required to abide by rules - adopting new practices, for example, as a condition of getting land. Lest you suspect me to be taking liberties with the text, here is an exact quote from a 1961 report of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the forerunner of the World Bank) in which these principles were articulated back in 1961:

When people move to new areas, they are likely to be more prepared for and receptive of change than when they remain in their familiar surroundings. And where people are under the pressure to move or see the advantage of doing so, they can be required to abide by the rules and to adopt new practices as a condition of receiving land. The mission concludes that quicker progress towards these ends is likely to be made, within the limitations of the resources for government action, by planned settlement of empty areas than through exclusive concentration on improvement of methods in settled areas.³

Examples of the implementation of the principles of modernisation theory were the

² It was anticipated that part of the process would include providing people with access to such services as markets, transportation, education and modern medicine. Unfortunately, most African countries experimenting with this approach were unable to afford to maintain these services even if they were introduced at the beginning of a project which was funded by loans.

³ Quoted by P. Daley, 'Refugees and under development in Africa: The case of Burundi refugees in Tanzania', D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1989, p.205,

World Bank's integrated rural agricultural projects, which were capital intensive. Because these schemes were expected to promote export earnings and to make profits to repay the loans taken out to set them up, they had to be directed by the creditors' own expatriate technical and administrative personnel.

Another example which followed this approach to economic development was the 'ujamaa village' concept employed in Tanzania in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the uprooting of at least five million people. In Ethiopia, between 1978 and 1986, five to twelve million people were 'regrouped' to develop agricultural cooperatives - a figure that does not include those people who were forced from the north to the south for what were primarily military and strategic reasons. Development policies in the post-independence period in Mozambique were guided by the same principles, with 1.2 million people being forced to congregate in 'socialist villages'. Between 1971 and 1982 some 200,000 people were similarly moved to 'socialist villages' in Algeria. In fact, different ideological persuasions aside, at least 25 million people have been 'villagized' in both pre- and post-independent Africa. This suggests that if uprooting was really 'good for you', then the African continent should be one of the better-off parts of the world!

How does all of this relate to refugee camps? The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established to protect the rights of refugees. According to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, these rights include an approach to assisting refugees that would lead to their integration in the host society. In fact, the Convention uses the word, 'assimilation', a term that implies the disappearance of differences between refugees and their hosts.

When UNHCR was established after the Second World War, its 'clients' were all Europeans. Other organizations, even the military forces of the allies, took care of the material needs of refugees. UNHCR became involved in assistance programmes for refugees in Africa in the heyday of the practise of modernization theory. For this organization, Africa was an entirely different context to which it had to adjust.

As a consequence of the experience of others who were 'developing' underdeveloped Africa, UNHCR also saw African refugees through the lens of modernization theory. Refugee settlement in host countries was not intended to result in situations of internment, which has become the norm in so many African countries today. Quite the contrary. Settling people in refugee camps was the means through which refugee livelihoods would be established and this new population be integrated into the host economy with some minimal international assistance.

A settlement was defined by UNHCR as "a deliberate and coherent package and administrative measures whereby a group of refugees is enabled to settle on land, usually in an uninhabited or sparsely-populated area, with a view to creating new self-supporting rural communities that ultimately will form part of the economic and social system of the area."⁴ Integration was described as "a process whereby a group of refugees settles down in the country of asylum either in existing villages or by

⁴ Quoted by P. Daley, op cit, p.127.

establishing new villages, in or near the area of arrival, which is usually inhabited by a population of similar ethnic origin, by arrangements with the local chiefs and other leaders of the local population, as well as with representatives of the central government, but only with ancillary material assistance from the outside.”⁵

Needless to say, modernization theory did not work in Africa. When it became increasingly clear to the World Bank that its projects were failing, the Bank quietly abandoned its efforts to ‘modernize’ African peasants. It turned its attention back to big projects, like dams - projects that also permanently uprooted people. The assistance given to these people was described in terms of ‘involuntary resettlement programmes’. These were also ‘organized settlements’ which were expected to lead to the restoration of the livelihoods which the involuntary settlers had lost.

Research, however, documented the adverse social, psychological and economic consequences of such involuntary resettlement programmes. It was found that resettled people suffered higher rates of mortality and morbidity and that they got poorer and poorer. Many were traumatized by being resettled against their will. The experiences were especially difficult for the elderly. Moreover, researchers found out that rather than these uprooted people being more amenable to change, they were clinging to the past. Rather than reaching out to grasp new ideas and technologies to make a living, research demonstrated that forcibly uprooted people become more conservative, more afraid to take risks or try out new ideas.

Similarly, research showed UNHCR’s approach to integration-through-agricultural-settlements was also failing. By the late 1970s, it was found that the vast majority of the long-term camp populations had become increasingly destitute. Even where there was thought to be enough land for people to have become self-sufficient, many had to be resupplied with food aid to prevent mass starvation. Even though it was well-known at the time that most people were ‘spontaneously settled’ outside these failed settlements, UNHCR did not look for alternatives by studying how these people were surviving.

Some readers of this paper may remember the heady days of ICARA II (Second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa), held in Geneva in 1984. The key concepts then were ‘additionality’, ‘refugees as resources for development’, and the ‘refugee-affected area approach’. Although advised to do so, UNHCR was reluctant to hand over responsibility to UNDP to invest money in local institutions or in the capacity of a host country’s infrastructure which could have benefited both hosts and refugees. Even when both the Lome III and Lome IV agreements made funds available to governments who would follow this approach, it was resisted. Instead, a new, different rationale or justification for keeping refugees in camps emerged. This was the argument that refugees are, after all, only a temporary phenomenon.

Despite the evidence that most refugees cannot go home for years and years (and sometimes can never go home), it was now assumed that all refugees are only

⁵ Ibid, p.14.

temporary guests; they should and they will repatriate as soon as possible, whether, as many examples have shown, this return is voluntary or not.

Instead of hoping refugees will become integrated by means of camps, today's refugees are kept in camps, just surviving on assistance provided by international donors - assistance which is described as 'care and maintenance'. This international aid is completely undependable, erratic and inadequate. It is more and more difficult for the World Food Programme to raise the funds and food for the growing number of relief programmes around the world.

The question of responsibility

Who is responsible? UNHCR has often argued that governments are responsible for the policy of forcing refugees to stay in camps. They say that governments want refugees in camps because of their concerns about 'security'. The security of the refugees or that of the state? Given that the majority of refugees live outside of them, justifying camps on the grounds of 'security' is an argument that if closely examined, cannot be sustained. In fact, it is very well-known that congregating refugees in camps can actually create insecurity.

It is very interesting to note that in most conditions involving outsiders, governments are very protective of their sovereignty. Why is it that when it comes to refugee policy, most host governments in Africa appear quite willing to relinquish it? Is this because host governments believe they must have international aid to support refugees and that the only way to get it is to let foreign humanitarian organisations take over - to decide policy and to take charge of refugee assistance? For whatever reasons, this is exactly what has occurred. However, and according to international law, whether or not it delegates tasks to others, it is the host government which is ultimately responsible for policies implemented on its territory.

What host governments in Africa appear to have failed to appreciate is that just keeping refugees alive is a very expensive process when relief programmes are organized by foreign humanitarian organizations. Just how expensive is very difficult to determine because few aid organisations are prepared to be transparent about their expenditures. But more than one observer has noted that in many situations, the cost per refugee is much more than the gross national product per head of the population of the host country.

Can Africa really afford the camp-based relief programmes which international organisations organize? It has been said that the money spent on assistance to Rwandan refugees after 1994 was more than all the development aid which had been invested in Rwanda since its independence. Worse still, when refugees are forced to repatriate, the infrastructure built for refugees in camps is often bulldozed. What a waste!

Refugee children in camps

Just who is responsible for refugee children? Where in Africa is the government taking responsibility for what happens to children in camps? How many African governments ensure that the birth of every refugee child born on their soil is registered and that each child has a birth certificate? What nationality will these children have? What about those children who get lost from their parents or whose parents have been killed and who arrive on your soil as unaccompanied minors? Who assumes responsibility for family tracing?

The dangers and horrors of flight itself are experienced by children as well as their parents. When I asked children to draw 'refugee life', I found that most associated the term 'refugee' with violence and death. Listen to the words of one child explaining her drawing:

See, we was caught together with my father and they tied us with chain and some people were killed and the houses was burned. Here we are after that: we were in the village. They came once again. Immediately they started to beat us. They took our goats and cows and burned our houses - together with our clothes.

Are refugee camps good for children? Can anyone pursue a normal life in a camp? Camps are artificial environments where everyone is restricted in their freedom of movement. They are overcrowded and epidemics such as measles, dysentery, meningitis and cholera have been found to be major killers. The bigger the camps, the more pronounced these effects. A major consequence of life in a refugee camp is the almost inevitable exposure to a sub-nutritional diet. Epidemics of nutrition-related diseases are common in camps. These include night blindness, beri-beri, pellagra, and scurvy. They are caused by the lack of micro-nutrients - vitamins - in the rations supplied by international aid. There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that a child's ability to learn is permanently affected by prolonged state of malnutrition.

There is even the suggestion that growing up undernourished may be the reason why so many refugee women from southern Sudan have pelvises too small to deliver babies normally. Doctors in Kakuma camp in Kenya find the numbers requiring caesarean sections too high. It is frightening to think that if this is a consequence of malnutrition, unknown numbers of little girls are growing up in camps in Africa to face the same problem in motherhood.

Are refugee camps safe places for children? Ken Porter writes from one country in Africa:

Fear percolates through our camps and is, it seems, felt by all but most acutely by the children who huddle in terror through the dark hours. A persistent rumour in vogue at the moment is that children are disappearing during the night and having their blood taken for sale to the *mzungus* [white people] for use in black magic. Of course, there has not been one substantiated case of child disappearance but the destabilising effect

remains. Our medical workers are growing increasingly apprehensive about going to work since they are regularly dealing with blood for tests and the like. Two days ago, a Burundian medical worker was murdered and his body (hopefully already dead) set aflame to burn throughout the day. All because he was suspected of having been accomplice to the child-snatchers. Two others had been gruesomely murdered just the week before. This state of unease is most likely the result of those who intentionally wish to destabilize camp life, but the rumours resonate and take on a life of their own when the conditions in the camp are bad and the aid workers appear to have neither the interest nor ability to make changes that would improve their lot.⁶

Let us forget about the problems which occur within refugee camps as a result of the failures to exclude criminals. Congregating people in refugee camps have made them easy targets for regular attacks from across borders. In April 1996, Juma Oris's group entered Uganda from Sudan, attacking Ikafe refugee camp, cutting off noses and ears, and kidnapping. Only two weeks earlier I had been standing, with my eight year-old grandson, on the very spot where they carried out some of these atrocities. But perhaps the worst threat refugee children face is that of forcible recruitment into the armies of guerrilla fighters. Being in a camp is no protection from this.

What about the right to a family life? Many families are broken, children being cared for by only one parent, or without either parent. Sometimes a child has to act as head of family, trying to care for its younger siblings. In camp situations, children also lose role models to guide their development. Even where both parents are present, these children grow up under abnormal conditions. To feed their children, parents are dependent on hand-outs from strangers. Parents are deprived of their authority; their roles as carers and breadwinners are undermined by their dependence on a system over which they have no control. Parents become degraded in the eyes of their children. Parents suffer the further humiliation of standing in queues to get food, being forced to manipulate the system to get extra ration cards in order to have enough food. They may also suffer from enforced idleness which contributes to the loss of self-esteem, particularly that of men.

Domestic violence always increases in refugee situations and family breakdown is common. Both men and women may be suffering anxiety and depression as a consequence of the hopeless situation in which they are living. Substance abuse is a common problem among men, but women refugees also abuse alcohol as a means of forgetting. Whatever is happening at home, children in camps are growing up in conditions which do not permit their socialisation according to the values of their own culture. For example, little boys have no opportunity to learn agriculture work alongside their fathers.

What about the long term psychological impact of life in camps on the future mental health and personalities of children? We do not have time to explore this topic in any depth, but perhaps one way to illustrate how concerned we should be is to look at two

⁶ E-mail correspondence, 11 July 1997.

sets of attributes which describe behaviour.

Passive	Active
Dependent	Independent
Mendacious	Truthful
Unquestioning	Enquiring

If someone were then told that these words were to apply to children, there would be an almost universal agreement that the words in the right-hand column represent more desirable traits. Yet in large measure the social and physical environment of the camp in which the refugee child is found is one that fosters the traits displayed in the left-hand column.

Most children are inculcated with the precept, variously expressed, that cleanliness is next to godliness. Instead, for children in a refugee camp, cleanliness is next to impossible. Even where soap is part of the non-food ration, the amount distributed is inadequate for general cleaning and personal hygiene requirements. Availability of sufficient supplies of water is a problem in perhaps most refugee camps, but there are situations where it is rationed to as little as two to three litres per person per day - well under one flush of a western toilet, or two bottles. Three litres of water might be enough to satisfy cooking and some of an individual's requirement for fluid intake, but certainly it is not enough to take a bath in or to wash the children's clothes. This assumes, of course, that the child has another set of clothes to wear while the dirty clothes are being washed.

The distribution of clothing in camps is often a one-off event, undertaken in the early stages of a refugee situation. This is only one reason why people are forced to sell their rations. Not being able to keep one's clothes clean quickly increases the incidence of body lice and scabies. Scabies can lead to skin infections and lice serve as vectors for diseases such as relapsing fever, a potentially fatal disease.

Although theoretically UNHCR ensures that at least primary schools are available for all children in camps, education never constitutes a priority; schools are often set up long after a population is well established in a camp. Putting aside questions about the curriculum and in what language it is taught and whether it is one the children speak, unwashed children in dirty clothes do not show up for school.

Even if access to schools was not a problem, and children had proper clothes or even school uniforms to wear, there are many households in refugee camps where the labour of the children is critical to its survival. Parents, usually a woman who heads a household on her own, often need children to share the burdens of cooking, fetching water and firewood, or watching the younger children while the parent labours elsewhere. The school attendance of girls, but also of boys, is affected by camp life. The single most common cause of school absenteeism is the need to be present at food distributions to secure and to transport the family's ration.

Education is highly valued by both parents and children. There are cases such as the camp I visited in Sudan, in April 1997, where the students worked so hard that all of

a class of primary school leavers in a camp had earned the scores required to go on to secondary school. Whereas at home, the family may have been able to afford the tuition for higher studies, no such opportunity is generally available in most refugee situations. Worse still, because it is believed that if refugees were given access to secondary education, they would be loathe to repatriate.

What happens to post-primary children in camps where there is no capacity for productive work, for example, land for farming. What hope do the thousands of single young boys stranded in Kakuma camp in Kenya have for a normal future? The structure of life in refugee camps promotes indolence among adolescents. No agency that we know of has successfully established programmes to avoid the serious problems of delinquency in camps. Roving bands and idle groups pose a threat to social life at all levels in the camp. UNHCR has recognized that it is individuals in this age group which are most likely to be the perpetrators of sexual violence. Prostitutes and drug abusers are also common in camps and their numbers include the youth.

Are there alternative approaches?

Can governments look to other examples and resist the conditions attached to receiving international aid, that they give land to confine refugees in camps? Might there not be advantages to governments which find better uses for international aid to assist refugees than spending it on relief programmes?

There are two examples in Africa which are thought-provoking. When people found refuge in Guinea from the Guinea-Bissau liberation war, President Sekou Toure promoted the reception of the refugees by his own people: refugees were allowed to settle where they wanted. An assessment of this ad hoc self-settlement process by UNHCR itself was that there was no evidence that refugees were suffering discrimination or harassment from the locals, nor was there evidence of such problems as wide-scale malnutrition so commonly associated with camps.

Another example of an African country accommodating large numbers of refugees while refusing international assistance which was offered if it were channelled through refugee camps is Sierra Leone. Many thousands of Fula fled Guinea during Sekou Toure's rule and unknown numbers settled in Sierra Leone. Siaka Stevens, the Sierra Leonean President, refused to allow the establishment of refugee camps. There was no formal assistance provided the Fula outside the help they got from local people and the mosques. They were free to live anywhere. Disputes - usually over the cattle they brought with them - were settled in the local courts. One was even elected to be the leader of the Fula population in Freetown.

Had someone been studying their impact on the economy of Sierra Leone, from the standpoint of the 'burden' the refugees bore on the host society, I am sure they would have found that the country benefited from their presence. Certainly, many diamonds were dug and foreign exchange was more plentiful for imports, some of which went back to Guinea as well as staying in Sierra Leone.

I was living in Freetown during the time, conducting research on family law amongst the Fula people - one of whom was my cook. Although I knew he could not go back to Conakry, no one called him or the others refugees. The Fula were allowed to live an almost normal life in Sierra Leone. When the regime in Guinea changed, many of these people repatriated on their own and of their own free will. Had Sierra Leone and Liberia not had their own horrific problems of late, another effect of their long residence in Sierra Leone could have been to increase the economic integration of the Mano River Union, even of the Economic Union of West African States (ECOWAS), since Fula fled to almost all of the member states.

You may well ask, what do you do if there are 'too many' and they come 'too quickly' for such 'spontaneous' voluntary dispersal to take place? Everyone today bases their arguments on Rwanda in 1994, but Malawi hosted around a million Mozambicans and they were initially allowed to settle where they chose. Even when the numbers required new areas and camps to be opened up for refugees, attempts continued to operate the aid programme as it was originally designed to work - through government institutions, health and welfare. That has meant that at least some benefits of the aid programme for refugees have remained behind for the Malawians.

But a more recent example is perhaps more relevant. In the mid- to late 1990s, around 500,000 Liberians and Sierra Leoneans settled 'spontaneously' in Guinean border villages and towns. Again, the government did not create camps, and villages which welcomed refugees received support. No parallel health services were established, refugees received medical treatment at existing health centres and hospitals. UNHCR paid on a fee-for-service basis, equal to what the Guineans paid. Supplementary funding from foreign donors was directed to reinforce existing facilities rather than establish an alternative parallel system to support refugees.

Earlier I mentioned the high cost of relief programmes. The cost of the medical programme in Guinea was around US\$4 per refugee per annum. In 1996, one Ugandan doctor told us that humanitarian organizations were spending \$50 per refugee on health services, while the government was only able to afford to spend \$2 per person for its own citizens.

There are many other alternative approaches which I could cite - from Greece, Cyprus, India, and Nepal, all countries which at the time they received refugees were exceedingly poor and 'underdeveloped'. The fundamental difference is that in all these non-African cases, the government took the responsibility for making policy.

As a result of the Turkish/Greek population exchange of 1922-1924, almost overnight the population of Greece grew by one quarter; it received 1.5 million 'refugees', most arriving in the first year. Refugees were settled in towns and cities as well as in the countryside. When the Tibetans arrived in India, they went to work building roads. India decided to give Tibetans total autonomy as a government-in-exile. The refugees live in villages that are under the authority of the Dalai Lama. International assistance must go through this government-in-exile, which decides on

priorities and is responsible for its own population.

Cyprus is an example of a country which used a disaster as an opportunity. It took the money available for humanitarian assistance from international sources, and borrowed more to put refugees immediately to work - building their own permanent houses. With the pay they received, they bought their own food, thereby stimulating local production of food.

An analysis of the growth of the Cypriot economy since that time shows that it was the way that this government used this refugee crisis that largely accounts for its prosperity today. Why shouldn't Tanzania have used some of the aid money to pay Rwandese and Burundi refugees to build a permanent water system for all of Ngara district rather than that money being used to tanker water to so many refugees or buy bottled water for the expatriates? In 1996, one small agency was spending \$80 per day for bottled water for its staff!

Conclusion

With all the evidence mustered against camps, why does this approach persist? The reasons lie in the answers to the question: whose interests do refugee camps serve? And are there alternatives? Yes, there are, but exploring them is an immediate threat to the interests that refugee camps serve. Over the past decades, powerful bureaucratic and institutional interests have developed in keeping refugees in camps and dependent on relief.

Most international aid available for refugees is only available for relief programmes. These interests exist at both the international and national level. Relief programmes by-pass local institutions, they set up expensive parallel systems to deliver services targeted to refugees, then normally destroy them when they go away. For example, in Uganda, rather than expand the local hospitals in Arua, Maracha, and Yumbe, foreign organisations set up a 'field hospital' in Koboko. It is no longer there today. Relief organisations also co-opt the best local expertise, pay them higher salaries, and leave local institutions weakened. Are there alternatives? Yes. Why don't we put them into practice?