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# **Protracted Sahrawi displacement**

## Challenges and opportunities beyond encampment

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# Forced Migration Policy Briefings

The Refugee Studies Centre's (RSC) Forced Migration Policy Briefings series seeks to stimulate debates on issues of key interest to researchers, policy makers and practitioners from the fields of forced migration and humanitarian studies. Written by academic experts, the briefings provide policy-relevant research findings in an accessible format.

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# Executive summary

Established by the Polisario Front in 1975–1976 with Algerian support, the Sahrawi refugee camps in South-Western Algeria are currently estimated to house approximately 155,000 refugees (UNHCR/WFP 2004: 1), embodying UNHCR’s second oldest refugee caseload. For over 35 years, these spaces have been administered by the Polisario with substantial support from multilateral humanitarian agencies, state and non-state actors. In light of the continued impasse between the Polisario and Morocco over claims to the non-self-governing territory of the Western Sahara (commonly known as ‘Africa’s last colony’), and given both Polisario’s and Algeria’s refusal to allow Sahrawi refugees to locally integrate in the near-by Algerian military town of Tindouf, the dominant position held by the international community is that encampment remains the only feasible option for refugees in the foreseeable future. However, this assumption fails to engage with a range of alternative solutions that have been proposed and developed to date.

Since the 1970s, the Polisario has officially demonstrated its capacity to organise the camps internally, developing political, educational, health and social structures and services to attend to the needs of its ‘refugee-citizens.’ Throughout this protracted period, however, conditions in the camps have changed considerably, in part due to the emergence of major socio-economic differentiation amongst residents, influenced by money arriving in the form of remittances sent by Sahrawi individuals and families working in Spain, pensions paid by the Spanish government to refugees who were formerly colonial employees, employment by NGOs, and ‘gifts’ from Spanish families who host up to 10,000 Sahrawi children each year.

Indeed, while the camps are consistently represented to humanitarian observers as ‘ideal’ self-sufficient refugee camps which meet donors’ priorities regarding ‘good governance,’ this report outlines the urgent need to question mainstream assumptions regarding conditions and dynamics within the Sahrawi refugee camps, and to develop policy and programming responses accordingly. This is particularly significant given that idealised depictions of life in the Sahrawi refugee camps potentially risk normalising the status quo, thereby hiding the anomalous nature of the Sahrawi’s protracted displacement and failing to engage with the political causes, impacts and potential solutions to the conflict.

Concurrently, this Policy Briefing questions the dominant view that continued encampment is necessarily ‘the most likely scenario’ for this protracted conflict, as asserted by international observers. It does so by analysing the challenges and opportunities faced by Sahrawi refugees, their political representatives, and international actors, arguing that a careful analysis must be undertaken of the diverse alternative solutions which have been adopted or proposed by Sahrawi refugee families and their political representatives, the Polisario Front. The viability of these alternative solutions, and the specific protection concerns which may be associated with these individual, family and collective coping strategies, urgently require attention, and yet have remained unaddressed by policy makers to date.

Based upon research conducted in and about the Sahrawi refugee camps between 2001 and 2010 in Algeria, Cuba, South Africa, Spain and Syria, the report therefore presents key suggestions for consideration by humanitarian agencies, donor governments, civil society networks, the Polisario Front and Sahrawi refugees themselves. While concrete recommendations for each stakeholder are presented in the conclusion, three main intersecting concerns arise throughout the Policy Briefing:

1. As the protracted Sahrawi refugee camps are now more accessible to policy makers and academic researchers than ever before, there is an urgent need to undertake a detailed rights- and needs-based assessment of the camps' population. Beyond quantitative surveys and evaluations of internationally funded projects, long-standing assumptions regarding conditions in the camps and possible solutions to the conflict should be re-evaluated in light of both quantitative and qualitative analyses by Sahrawi refugees and non-Sahrawi academic researchers alike.
2. Drawing upon such research, the diverse experiences, needs, priorities and rights of girls, boys, youth, adult women and men, the elderly and the disabled must be identified, addressed and upheld. In particular, decreasing school enrolment rates and the withdrawal of eldest daughters from school must be tackled. Furthermore, as educated refugee youth increasingly leave the camps to work in Spain, an assessment is also needed of the extent to which this 'brain drain' is leading to a renewed dependence upon European NGOs.
3. Given the difficulties of securing traditional durable solutions for the protracted Sahrawi refugee situation (local integration, repatriation or resettlement in a third country), and the lack of political will to secure a comprehensive solution to the Western Sahara conflict, it is necessary to assess the viability of a range of alternative solutions which have been developed and prioritised by Sahrawi refugees and the Polisario. These alternative solutions include:
  - a. the development of family- and child-centred transnational networks;
  - b. the self-settlement of families in the *bādiya* (open desert);
  - c. the proposed relocation of part of the camps' population to Tifariti, which is located inside the internationally recognised borders of the Western Sahara.

Each of these solutions has clear potential implications for the protection needs and rights of the individuals involved.

Firstly, given Sahrawi refugees' increased reliance on civil society advocacy networks to sustain child- and family-centred coping strategies, it is essential to question the short-, medium- and long-term implications of Sahrawi refugee families' increasing dependence upon 'intimate aid' provided directly by European families and members of civil society networks.

Secondly, while the Sahrawi are currently recognised by UNHCR as mandate refugees, the settlement of families in the *bādiya* and the relocation of refugees to Tifariti would both, in effect, render the Sahrawi ‘internally displaced.’ Such a shift would potentially have serious legal and humanitarian impacts which must be considered carefully by all parties involved.

Thirdly, whether in scenarios of continued encampment in Algeria or in light of the alternative ‘popular’ solutions outlined above, it is necessary to clarify who is responsible for the legal and relief protection of displaced Sahrawi individuals and families, and to develop accountability mechanisms to monitor the implementation of relevant programmes and projects in these diverse contexts.

# 1 History of the protracted Sahrawi refugee situation

Over 35 years since the establishment of the Sahrawi refugee camps in South-Western Algeria, the Sahrawi refugee context is identified by UNHCR as ‘one of the most protracted refugee situations worldwide’ (UNHCR 2010)<sup>1</sup>, and is the organisation’s second oldest refugee caseload. In light of the continued impasse regarding the conflict over the disputed non-self-governing territory of the Western Sahara, the Polisario Front, the Algerian government and many Sahrawi refugees vocally reject international proposals for the promotion of local integration or resettlement to a third country as viable durable solutions, identifying voluntary repatriation following the establishment of an independent Western Sahara as the only acceptable solution to this conflict. While these parties regularly call upon the United Nations and relevant states to implement a political solution to resolve this conflict, negotiations have thus far failed to result in an agreement. Given the determined resistance and political challenges to the implementation of any of the three traditional durable solutions (local integration, resettlement to a third country and voluntary repatriation), international agencies assert that ongoing encampment appears to remain the only viable scenario for Sahrawi refugees.

The denomination of the Sahrawi camps as ‘the best run refugee camps in the world’ (Brazier 1997: 14), and of Sahrawi camp leaders as ‘ideal partners’ and examples of ‘best practice’ (UNHCR EXCOM 2001), might suggest that existing policies in the camps are adequate, justifying a continuation of the ‘care and maintenance’ programmes which have characterised these camps (and indeed other protracted refugee situations)<sup>2</sup> since their creation in the mid-1970s. Furthermore, such depictions also appear to accept the political status quo which underpins this context of protracted displacement, implying the relative normality of continued encampment, rather than laying the foundations for a political solution to be found for this refugee situation.

In contrast, this Policy Briefing analyses the challenges and opportunities faced by Sahrawi refugees, their political representatives, and international actors, arguing, firstly, that these mainstream assumptions regarding ‘ideal’ conditions and dynamics in the camps must be challenged, and, secondly, that a careful analysis must be undertaken of the diverse alternative solutions which have been adopted or proposed by Sahrawi refugee families on the one hand and their political representatives and camp managers (the Polisario Front) on the other. While the international community has thus far failed to secure a political solution to this conflict, and the political will to do so appears to be weak, the alternative solutions proposed by Sahrawi individuals and the Polisario challenge the status quo and have far-reaching socio-political, legal and humanitarian implications.

## **Background to the conflict over the Western Sahara**

The territory now known as the Western Sahara (see Map 1) was a Spanish colony from 1884 until 1976, and has remained on the UN Decolonisation Committee’s agenda since October 1964 to the present (UNGA 2007). In December 1974, as international and local pressure in favour of decolonisation escalated, Spain conducted a census of the territory in order to prepare for an eventual referendum for self-determination. However, by the end of 1975 Spain had decided to withdraw from its colony without holding a referendum.



**Map 1. Map of the Western Sahara**  
Deployment of the UN Mission for the Referendum for the Western Sahara, March 2011

Source: UN Cartographic Section, Map No. 3691 Rev. 65



Although Spanish military forces had been combating increasing anti-colonial sentiment and activism in the territory between 1970 and 1975, with Spain's military dictator (General Franco) gravely ill, and the Spanish mainland itself experiencing violent threats from political and military groups, these forces rapidly left the colony to 'maintain the peace' in the metropolis. It was during this period that the main anti-colonial movement, the Polisario Front, was born and gained popular support, first resisting Spanish colonialism, and later Moroccan and Mauritanian claims over the territory.

The UN Mission of Inquiry to the territory in May 1975 prompted the first major pro-Polisario demonstration in the Spanish Sahara, leading the Mission to unambiguously declare that there was 'overwhelming consensus[...]in favour of independence,' and 'support for one movement, the Frente Polisario' (UNGA 1975: 59). Although the International Court of Justice ruled in its Advisory Opinion of October 1975 that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had legal claims to the territory that should impede holding a referendum for self-determination (ICJ 1975: 12), 350,000 Moroccan civilians faced no resistance from Spanish or international forces as they crossed into the territory in early November 1975 as part of the 'Green March' designed by Rabat to recover its 'Southern Provinces.' Approximately 20,000 Moroccan soldiers soon joined their civilian compatriots from the North (Chopra 1999), while Mauritanian forces entered from the South, ignoring UN Resolutions (including Resolution 380 passed on 6 November 1975) deploring the March and calling for its termination. Moroccan administration of the territory began shortly after a Tripartite Interim Administration agreement was signed between Morocco, Mauritania and Spain in the second week of November 1975, a week before the death of General Franco.

The armed conflict between Morocco, Mauritania and the Polisario intensified from the end of 1975 onwards, with a mass exodus of Sahrawi firstly being displaced to other parts of the territory (especially to Um Draiga, Tifariti and Guelta Zemmur), and later, following the bombardment of these first encampments with napalm and phosphate bombs (Mercer 1979; Lippert 1987; Andrade 2003), to the nascent Algerian-based refugee camps near the territory's border with that country.

Spain officially withdrew from the territory and unilaterally declared that it was no longer the administrative power on 26 February 1976, a day before the Polisario Front proclaimed the birth of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)<sup>3</sup>. Political conflicts ensued between states which recognised and lobbied in favour of the Polisario/SADR's struggle for independence and those which did not. Such conflicts were bilateral (between Algeria and Morocco, for instance) as well as multilateral, playing out in arenas such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) (Lynn Price 1981; Damis 1983). As a result of intensive lobbying at the OAU in favour of the Polisario/SADR, Morocco eventually suspended its membership in 1982 and officially withdrew from the OAU in 1984 after that organisation recognised the SADR. In addition to its being recognised as a full member by the OAU and later the African Union, over 70 non-European countries have since then established full diplomatic relations with the SADR. From 1976 to the present, the conflict over the Western Sahara has thus been dominated

by the main parties (Morocco and Polisario) attempting to convince influential state and non-state actors to support their respective political standpoints, and recognise the legitimacy of their claims over the territory and its inhabitants.

Throughout the 1980s, political negotiations to resolve the conflict were paralleled by the military conflict between Polisario (reportedly with Algerian military support) and Morocco. The latter had French and US support, but acted without Mauritania which had signed a ceasefire with the Polisario on 12 July 1978, retracted its claims to (and soldiers from) the territory, and eventually recognised and established full diplomatic relations with the SADR in 1984. Between 1980 and 1987, Morocco built six sand walls (with a total length of over 2000 km) with electronic detection networks and radar systems in place, to defend the areas of the territory under its control (including, in particular, phosphate-rich areas) and to keep Polisario guerrilla groups out. Despite the existence of the wall (known as the *berm*), armed hostilities continued until the OAU and UN brokered a ceasefire in 1988. The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was created in 1991 with a mandate to organise and hold a referendum for self-determination. A lengthy and contested voter identification process ensued, with both parties questioning the criteria for the eligibility to vote, and appealing the inclusion or exclusion of thousands of applicants. Although the identification process was completed in 2000, a referendum has not yet been held; the ceasefire has broadly been observed since then.<sup>4</sup>

The reported discovery of offshore oil reserves increased widespread geopolitical interest in the region whilst simultaneously decreasing the likelihood of the referendum being held. The unresolved nature of this conflict continues to affect regional and global politics, as evidenced in tense Algerian-Moroccan relations, Morocco's continued absence from key regional bodies (such as the African Union), and EU and UN debates regarding the legality of Moroccan fishing agreements and oil contracts relating to the Western Sahara; regular and ongoing peace-talks and informal meetings continue to take place between Morocco and the Polisario under the auspices of the UN.

While a discussion of conditions within the Western Sahara itself is beyond the scope of this briefing,<sup>5</sup> and the precise number of Sahrawis living inside of the Moroccan-administered Western Sahara is contested by the Moroccan government and the Polisario alike (see Box 1),<sup>6</sup> it is important to note that political tension and violence against Sahrawis persists in the non-self-governing territory of the Western Sahara; in November and December 2010, for instance, major confrontations between Sahrawi protesters and the Moroccan security forces were documented by Amnesty International (2010) and Human Rights Watch (2010). In addition to Sahrawis based within the Moroccan-controlled area of the Western Sahara, it is estimated that over 20,000 Sahrawi refugees reside in the *bādiya* (open desert) between the berm and the border with Mauritania (see Map 1), in an area controlled by the Polisario which is commonly referred to by Sahrawis and pro-Polisario activists as 'the liberated territories' (see below). Furthermore, a UNHCR registration exercise also documents that 26,000 Sahrawis were based in Mauritania in 2000, and would wish to repatriate to the Western Sahara if a referendum for self-determination were to be held (UNHCR 2000b).<sup>7</sup>

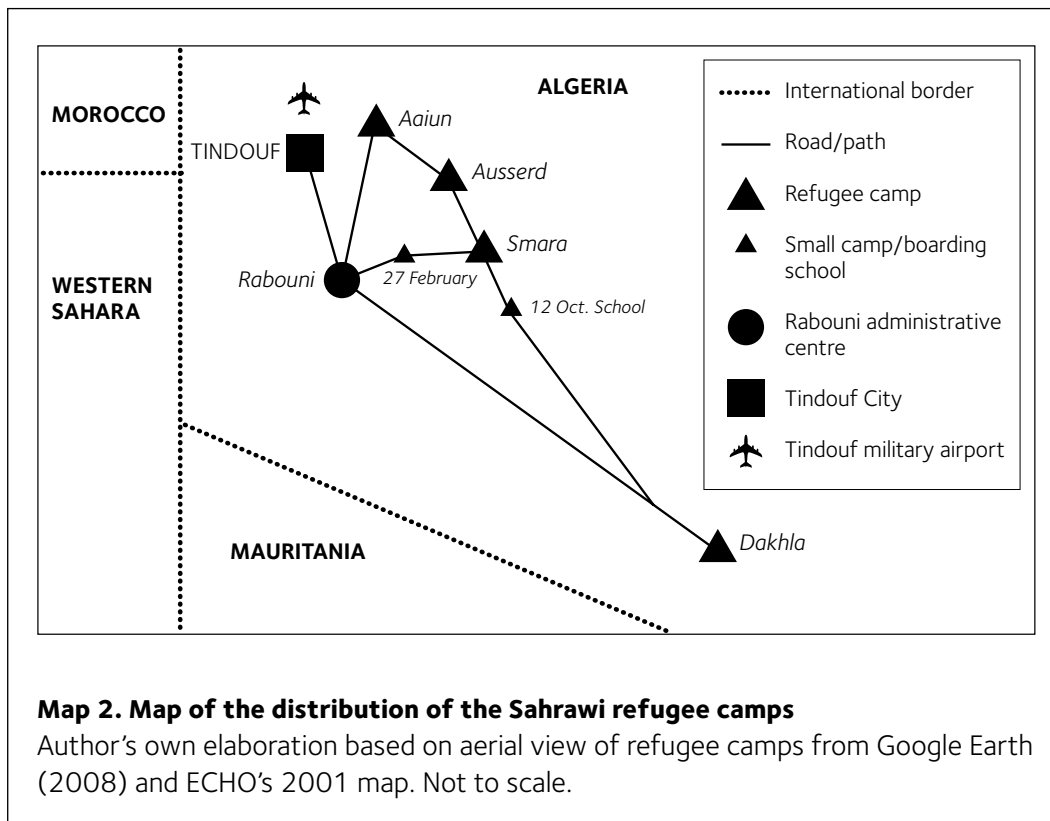
**Box 1. 'Sahrawi'**

The identity label 'Sahrawi' is a matter of great legal and political contention. Literally, the term *sahrawi* in Arabic refers to any inhabitant of the desert (*ṣaḥrā*). However, the term is most frequently used in the West as an umbrella term to refer to those individuals who belong to specific tribes which have traditionally lived and moved throughout the territory currently defined as the Western Sahara. This usage is relatively recent, emerging towards the end of the Spanish colonial presence in the territory. In the 1970s, the term Sahrawi was increasingly mobilised (and arguably monopolised) by the Polisario Front as a political unifier and identifier for the multiple tribes which moved in and around the territory. It is, as a result, intimately related to this group's political struggles. Given that tribal identification is the primary basis for the referendum for self-determination designed to resolve the conflict over the Western Sahara, precisely which tribes and individuals are defined as 'Sahrawi' rather than 'Moroccan' or 'Mauritanian' is politically and legally highly significant.

**The Sahrawi refugee camps**

In 1975, the Sahrawi refugee camps were established by the Polisario near the Algerian military town of Tindouf. The first Spanish and French civil society 'committees in support of the Sahrawi people' were created in October and November 1975 (Wirth and Balaguer 1976; Julien 2003), providing the foundation of a 'solidarity movement' which has played an increasingly significant role in securing the political and physical survival of the camps and their inhabitants. The International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC) recognised the Sahrawi Red Crescent in early 1976 (Wirth and Balaguer 1976), and preliminary humanitarian supplies, including tents and medical items, were provided by the ICRC and the Algerian government. Alongside Algeria, key 'friendly states' have historically included Cuba, Libya and Syria, while South Africa has more recently established diplomatic ties and offered significant financial and political support to the SADR (see below). Spanish civil society and local governmental institutions have provided substantial material resources to the Polisario/SADR and camp residents: reflecting a high level of institutional support, it is noteworthy that in the Basque Country alone, 71% of all cooperation and development projects financed and managed by Guipúzcoa's 27 Municipal Councils were related to the Sahrawi people in 2007–2008 (M.O. 2008).

With international support from friendly states and civil society movements, since the mid-1970s the Polisario/SADR has asserted control over its 'refugee-citizens' through the development of its own constitution, camp-based police force (and prisons), army and parallel state and religious legal systems (the latter of which implements a Maliki interpretation of Islam). A number of 'national' Sahrawi institutions, such as the National Parliament and National Council, National Hospital and Pharmaceutical Laboratory, the National War Hospital and the Landmine Victims' Centre, are all located close to the camps' administrative capital (Rabouni), which, in turn, is some 25 km from Tindouf and its military airport.



Approximately 155,000 refugees are currently distributed amongst four major camps named after the main cities in the Western Sahara (Aaiun, Ausserd, Smara and Dakhla), and a fifth, smaller camp which has developed around the National Women's School (called the 27 February Camp). The four main camps are headed by a Sahrawi governor (*wāli*) who is appointed by the Polisario Secretary General and President of the SADR (Mohammed Abdelaziz), and each camp is divided into a number of districts (*dawā'ir*, sing. *dā'ira*), with each district sub-divided into neighbourhoods (*aḥyā'a*, sing. *ḥay*). Key administrative and managerial functions are completed by camp residents employed by the Polisario/SADR.

*Polisario/SADR and legal ambiguities: responsibilities to protect?*

Unlike refugee camps which are run and controlled by international organisations such as UNHCR, in the Sahrawi context, the Polisario/SADR is 'the only authority with which camp residents have regular contact,' as the Algerian government has 'ceded de facto administration' to the Polisario/SADR (HRW 2008: 9), enabling them to 'manage their own civil society and social systems without interference' (WFP 2009–2010: 7). Such high levels of self-management and the Polisario's de facto control over the Algerian territory upon which the camps have been built, distinguish the Sahrawi camps from the majority of refugee camp contexts around the world.

In addition to demonstrating its effective control over the camps and their residents, since 1976, the camp-based and camp-run SADR has established full diplomatic relations with over 70 states across the Global South. Furthermore, as a full member of the OAU and later the African Union,<sup>8</sup> the SADR has signed and ratified the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and has signed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the Protocol to the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism.<sup>9</sup> More recently, in October 2009 the SADR signed the African Union's Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (known as the Kampala Convention).<sup>10</sup>

However, although the SADR is both recognised as a state by over 70 states, and has acted 'as a state' by ratifying OAU/AU regional conventions, the Polisario holds neither observer status at the UN (Wilson 1988: 141), nor any other form of official status or recognition before the UN (OHCHR 2006: 11). This is in direct contrast with the Palestine Liberation Organisation/Palestinian Authority, which has established diplomatic relations and has observer status at the UN (Wilson 1988). This discrepancy raises questions surrounding the mechanisms and decision-making processes to grant official status and recognition in intergovernmental organisations such as the UN.

Whilst declaring that it is a 'state', the Polisario/SADR nonetheless recognises that it is classified as a 'non-state actor' by many international observers; as such, while it is legally ineligible to sign the 1997 Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (known as the Ottawa Convention), as it is not recognised as a state by the UN, in 2005 the Polisario/SADR signed the complementary mechanism available to non-state actors, known as the Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call for the Adherence to a Total ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action.

According to the UN's Human Rights Commission, the SADR 'has no international obligations under international human rights treaties' (OHCHR 2006: 11), thereby implying that the OHCHR does not recognise the legal value of the regional ratifications outlined above. Rather, OHCHR argues that it is Algeria, as the host state, which is legally responsible for Sahrawi refugees residing in its territory (ibid.). In particular, OHCHR reiterates that while Algeria 'holds that it bears no responsibility with regard to the human rights situation of the Sahrawi people' (since it recognises the SADR's jurisdiction, and in effect sovereignty, over the camps), 'no international human rights treaty body has specifically validated this view with regard to the international human rights obligations accepted by Algeria' (ibid.: 13). In OHCHR's view, therefore, 'Algeria should take all relevant measures to ensure that all individuals present on its territory benefit from the protection of the international human rights conventions to which it is a party' (ibid.). Simultaneously, however, Human Rights Watch argues that 'although Algeria remains ultimately responsible ... Polisario needs to be accountable for how it treats the people under its administration' (HRW 2008). Such calls are in line with international

humanitarian law, including Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which provides that non-state parties to a conflict are to uphold key responsibilities to protect civilians.

This therefore presents an anomalous situation whereby the Polisario/SADR is simultaneously recognised as a state by some members of the international community, presents itself as a state which is obliged to adhere to central tenets of international human rights law, and yet is also classified as a non-state actor by the UN and other actors who argue that 'it has no international obligations under international human rights treaties' and therefore cannot formally be held accountable to the Charters which it has signed 'as a state.' This case is therefore not only highly relevant to on-going debates concerning the responsibilities of non-state actors in armed conflict around the world (see e.g. Clapham 2006), but also raises specific questions which remain unresolved with regard to the responsibilities of state, quasi-state, and non-state actors to provide meaningful legal and relief protection to Sahrawi refugees living under the 'jurisdiction' of the SADR.

#### *The politics of numbers: inconsistencies and implications*

Although the Polisario/SADR and the Algerian government have consistently stated that the camp population has always been 165,000, international agencies assert that there is no reliable census data on the camps. In its 2010 Algeria Fact Sheet, UNHCR reiterates that it is in dialogue with the Algerian 'host Government and the Sahrawi refugee leadership seeking to conduct a registration exercise to determine the exact number of refugees in the camps. Pending a positive conclusion of this dialogue, for the purpose of UNHCR's humanitarian operation, the office is using a planning figure of 90,000 vulnerable refugees in the camps' (2010: 1).<sup>11</sup>

However, since the 1990s the UN has presented contradictory statistics in its official demographic overviews of the refugee population. It is particularly notable that different sections of UNHCR provide widely divergent statistics apropos the total camp population and those receiving (or requiring) food aid: directly contradicting the WFP and UNHCR statistics included in Table 1, for instance, a UNHCR EXCOM report drawing on UNHCR statistics indicates that the population was 165,000 between 1998 and 2004, decreasing to the planning figure of 90,000 in 2005 and 2006 (UNHCR EXCOM 2008).

These figures do not reflect demographic shifts or changes in the number of camp residents per se, but rather epitomise what is commonly referred to as the broader trend of the 'politics of numbers' in contexts of displacement, in which different actors are identified as over- or under-estimating population sizes for political purposes (Crisp 1999). This brief discussion also points both to the bureaucratic challenges faced by large humanitarian agencies which lead them to present internally inconsistent figures in their public reports,<sup>12</sup> and equally to the subsequent implications for nutritional levels when such inconsistent figures are used for planning purposes.

**Table 1. UNHCR and WFP estimates of the camp population, and numbers for whom food aid was provided in given years**

	UNHCR total population estimate	WFP total population estimate (where different)	Total WFP beneficiaries
1993	*165,000		80,000
1994	*165,000		80,000
1995	*165,000		80,000
1996	*165,000		80,000
1997	*165,000	144,000	80,000
1998 (Jan–June)	*165,000	122,000	49,000
1998 (July–Dec)	*165,000		80,000
1999	155,000		80,000
2000	155,430		155,430
2001	155,430		
2002	155,430		155,430
2003	146,925		
2004	170,000	158,800	125,000
2005	90,000		
2006	90,000		90,484
2007	90,000		125,000
2008	90,000		125,000
2009	90,000		125,000
2010	90,000		125,000

\*The figure of 165,000 used by UNHCR between 1993 and 1998 is based on the figures provided by the Government of Algeria.

Sources: Compiled by the author from WFP reports (1997–2011), UNHCR Statistical Yearbooks, Annual Global Reports and Global Appeals (1994–2010), and EXCOM Conclusions (2008).

Indeed, high levels of chronic infant and maternal malnutrition amongst residents can be identified as one of the key reasons underpinning the relative increase in the number of rations provided by the World Food Programme:<sup>13</sup> from the delivery of a minimum of 49,000 rations and a maximum of 80,000 rations between 1993 and 1999, Sahrawi refugees currently receive food aid via a WFP Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation which distributes 90,000 general food rations, and 35,000 supplementary general rations for a total target population of 125,000 people (WFP 2011).

For population statistics to reflect shifts in ‘dynamic social groups,’ registration must take place periodically to account for births, deaths, family regrouping or splitting, and migration for employment or education; however, regular registration is expensive and is often actively resisted by host governments and local actors (Crisp 1999: 7–8). In line with this assertion, the inconsistent statistics included above are at times justified with reference to the parties’ refusal to grant UNHCR permission to complete a census in the camps. However, while *regular* registration has certainly not taken place in the Sahrawi context, between 1999 and 2000 a preliminary registration for repatriation was conducted by UNHCR. This process is rarely if ever referred to in academic or policy reports on the camps (including UNHCR’s own documentation), and yet concluded that *at least* 107,000 camp-based refugees (potential voters and their immediate families) would wish to return to the Western Sahara under the auspices of a UNHCR repatriation programme if a referendum for self-determination were to be conducted (UNHCR 2000b: 187; WFP 1999: 4). During a visit to the camps in 2004, the US Mission/Rome Humanitarian Attaché was furthermore reportedly informed by UN staff that, at the time of the registration exercise, there was ‘general agreement that between 25,000 and 30,000 had not yet been registered’ in the camps.<sup>14</sup>

Following this official preliminary registration exercise, the total camp population, including ‘non-voters’ living in the camps, was calculated by UNHCR and WFP in 1999 and 2000 as being 155,430, with the Joint WFP/UNHCR Assessment Mission to the camps in 2004 noting that ‘an estimation carried out during the mid-term evaluation conducted in September 2003 using child vaccination records, primary school attendance levels and MINURSO list of eligible voters [...] comes with a total refugee population of 158,800 persons’ (UNHCR/WFP 2004: 1). The High Commissioner’s office nonetheless continues to present divergent figures in its public reports, and oscillates between referring to the 1999 preliminary registration exercise and other UN official estimates (UNHCR EXCOM 2010a: 7), and stating that ‘UNHCR has no way to determine the exact number of refugees presently staying in Tindouf’ (2010b, footnote 7).

It is indeed important to note that these and other statistics (see below) cited in the Sahrawi context fail to reflect the fluidity of household structures in the Sahrawi refugee camps, many of whose members continue to be highly mobile, travelling between the camps, to the *bādiya* or abroad to visit family, to complete their schooling, or for employment purposes. It is nonetheless essential for UNHCR to ensure that all of its relevant sections rely both on consistent figures and consistent references to registration exercises in their internal and publicly available reports.



## 2 Mainstream academic and policy assumptions

The majority of the earliest academic and non-governmental reports on the Sahrawi refugee camps have systematically asserted and celebrated the Polisario/SADR's 'participatory ideology' and 'democratic' organisation of the camps (e.g. Harrell-Bond 1981: 1–4 and 1999: 156; Black 1984: 1–2; Mowles 1986: 8–9), further highlighting that the camps are 'models of efficient local government' (Brazier 1997: 14).<sup>15</sup> In *Imposing Aid* (1986), a seminal book which prompted a major shift in the way that refugees and refugee camps around the world are perceived and dealt with by aid providers and academics, Harrell-Bond labels the Sahrawi camps a 'success story' amidst an otherwise failing humanitarian system which creates 'dependency syndrome' amongst refugees (also Voutira and Harrell-Bond 2000: 66). The denomination of the Sahrawi camps as a 'success story' in the 1980s, and of the Sahrawi as 'good' and even 'ideal' refugees (Harrell-Bond 1999: 151) living in 'the best run refugee camps in the world' in the 1990s (Brazier 1997: 14), has continued to dominate mainstream accounts of the Sahrawi refugee context in the 2000s. For instance, in 2002, Mundy asserted that 'the self-governing structures within the refugee camps are among the most impressive examples of participatory democracy in the world,' describing them as a uniquely 'progressive and democratic model' (quoted in Mundy and Zunes 2002). Indeed, the long-standing and systematic assertions regarding the 'ideal' nature of the Sahrawi refugee camps are also reflected in the UNHCR Executive Committee's designation in 2001 of the refugee camp-based National Union of Sahrawi Women (NUSW) as an 'ideal partner,' proclaiming that the Women's Union is a role model which the United Nations agency is 'learning from' (UNHCR EXCOM 2001, para 26). In the same year, UNHCR's Refugee Women and Gender Equality Unit explicitly presented the NUSW as an example of 'good practice on gender mainstreaming' (2001).<sup>16</sup>

The key features which are heralded in these and more recent accounts<sup>17</sup> therefore include the Sahrawi's democratic political structures, high levels of female participation in socio-political arenas and institutions, and, overall, the Sahrawi's determination to be self-sufficient refugee-citizens within the SADR state-in-exile. For instance, although the camps are highly (almost entirely) dependent upon aid brought in from outside of the camps, it is usually distributed by Sahrawi refugees themselves, rather than by foreign humanitarian workers. In line with the Polisario/SADR's determination to ensure the 'self-sufficiency' of the camps, Sahrawi refugees have often informed visitors that 'we do not want "experts" in our camps' (Harrell-Bond 1999: 156).<sup>18</sup>

However, such depictions must be questioned on a variety of levels. Firstly, these 'idealising' accounts of the camps potentially risk normalising the status quo, thereby hiding the anomalous nature of the Sahrawi's protracted displacement, and failing to engage with the political causes and potential solutions to the conflict. Secondly, while the Sahrawi camps have indeed been heralded for the 'successful' self-management of the camps, organisations such as the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Committee have equally recognised that this high level of participation and self-management 'can also be a constraint... and a risk, particularly as regards monitoring' (ECHO 2009: 7). More concretely, the European Commission has recognised that 'The quality of aid monitoring by international agencies and NGOs – both to measure impact and to ensure

the appropriate use of public funds – is dependent on the arrangements that they reach with their Sahrawi counterparts, and the latter's acceptance of accountability and control requirements' (ibid.: 7). Although an improvement has been noted following an agreement between DG ECHO and the Polisario in 2004, it is essential to 'ensure transparency in the use of public funds and to improve the quality of the aid delivered to the refugees' (ibid.). Lastly, it is simultaneously imperative to question the designation of the Sahrawi refugee camps as examples of 'best practice', to identify the policy implications of this idealised conceptualisation of the camps, and to identify different mechanisms to maximise the delivery of meaningful protection to Sahrawi refugees.

Such idealised depictions of the camps are at least partly due to the failure of international observers and agencies to complete a comprehensive needs and rights assessment in the camps. Indeed, although a range of humanitarian organisations complete regular assessments of food security, water and sanitation and health sectors, a detailed and broad needs and rights-based assessment has never been conducted in all the time the camps have been in existence. One reason for this may be that international agencies and bodies wishing to implement or fund projects in the camps must all obtain permission from the Polisario/SADR to access them. In addition to visas being dependent upon official Polisario/SADR permission, until recently, most visitors to the camps have completed only short visits (ten or fifteen days) to the camps,<sup>19</sup> during which time they have been accompanied by Polisario 'guides' who have taken them on 'tours' of the key 'national institutions,' and have stayed with visitors in Polisario's accommodation centres.

In the past few years, however, it has become possible for interested observers to conduct longer research visits of up to three months in the camps, both for humanitarian and academic purposes (cf. Chatty 2010: 13). In direct contrast with the UNHCR/WFP Joint Assessment Mission's conclusion to its camp evaluation in 2007 that 'the overall context was not conducive' to focus group discussions (2007: 4), the members of a 2009 ECHO evaluation mission to the camps noted that '[t]here were far less limitations in conducting the evaluation than could have been foreseen. There was unhindered access to beneficiaries and data, with the exception of population figures and neonatal mortality data' (Hidalgo et al. 2009: 21).

In light of this significant improvement in access, and the increased space offered to both academic researchers and humanitarian workers, it is essential for international agencies and policy makers to complete multifaceted needs assessments 'to further identify, in a participatory fashion, the differentiated needs of the affected population' (ibid.: 25). Indeed, the urgency of developing 'a planning framework based on assessment of a broad range of community and individual needs' and enabling 'invisible' people to be consulted and actively engaged in the planning process has been broadly promoted in humanitarian and development spheres (El-Bushra and Piza-López 1993: 191).

The UNHCR Refugee Women and Equality Unit (2001: 7) argues that

*Gender equality mainstreaming ... ensures that the different interests, needs and resources of displaced women and men, girls and boys, are taken into consideration at every step of the refugee cycle, in UNHCR protection activities, as well as in program design, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. It requires active consultation with displaced women, men and youth in all aspects of UNHCR's work.*

In spite of UNHCR's official commitment to Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming, which centralises gender equality mainstreaming and participatory consultations, and despite international declarations of the 'success' and 'good practice' in the camps, however, there remains a key need to identify and respond to a variety of protection needs faced by different social groups in the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010c).

While most evaluations and assessments by organisations such as ECHO, UNHCR and WFP have until now primarily, and typically exclusively, relied upon interviews with NGO employees, UNHCR and WFP staff, and members of the Polisario/SADR administration (e.g. UNHCR/WFP 2007: 4), policy makers must identify means to engage more directly with a wide range of refugees themselves via qualitative, and participatory, research methodologies.

A number of such initiatives have been in place since the mid-2000s, and yet a dialogue between qualitative researchers and policy makers is still pending. For instance, a camp-based anthropological research group has been formed by Sahrawi refugees who hold university social and natural science degrees from Cuba, Syria, Libya and Algeria; the group's office is in the National Union of Sahrawi Women's headquarters in the 27 February Camp, and is supported by Italian and Spanish organisations. These and other university graduates are increasingly conducting research both for Polisario organisations and also for and with non-Sahrawi academic projects. Such collaborative projects include a youth-focused analysis funded by Spain's Youth Council (*Consejo de la Juventud de España*), and completed by members of the Polisario's Youth Union and Spanish academics from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Gimeno-Martin and Laman 2005). A second project involving Sahrawi researchers was the University of Oxford's study, *Children and Adolescents in Sahrawi and Afghan Refugee Households: Living with the Effects of Prolonged Armed Conflict and Forced Migration* (known as 'SARC').<sup>20</sup> Other academic research based upon fieldwork by non-Sahrawi doctoral and post-doctoral researchers in the camps is also emerging. While such research may not always be relevant to policy makers, and will benefit from careful analysis and triangulation, fieldwork conducted in the camps may help organisations fill gaps in qualitative understandings of Sahrawi refugees' lives, priorities and needs.

The subsequent sub-sections draw on such research to address, firstly, the experiences of boys and girls with specific reference to access to education; secondly, youth experiences and expectations for the future; and thirdly, refugee assessments of the roles played by UN agencies on the one hand, and Spanish civil society networks on the other.

**Children and education**

Alongside different total population estimates, UNHCR, ECHO and WFP also offer diverging calculations of the percentage of the camp population which is aged under 18. ECHO’s figures for 1999 calculate that 57% of the population was under the age of 12 (83,602 children out of its estimated total population of 147,474) (ECHO 2001); in 2001/2002, WFP estimated that 40% of the population was aged 14 or under (WFP 2002), while in 2004, UNHCR estimated that 56% of the refugee camp population was under the age of 18 (UNHCR 2004b; see Table 2). In spite of these differing figures, the overall camp population is evidently young, with a large proportion of inhabitants having been born in the camps between 1975 and today.

Sahrawi children attend 29 pre-school centres, 31 primary schools and seven lower-secondary schools in the camps (WFP 2009/2010: 2), with some students eventually moving to a ‘national’ boarding school to complete their secondary studies. A smaller cohort complete their secondary and tertiary education abroad, including in Algeria, Cuba, Libya and Syria.<sup>21</sup> Although two boarding schools existed in the camps until the mid-2000s, only the 12th October Secondary School has been functioning since the major 2006 floods destroyed the 9th June (lower-secondary) School. This has dramatically limited the number of students able to attend secondary school in the camps; according to UNHCR, the Spanish government’s Cooperation Unit (AECID) in Tindouf has offered to complement the UN agency’s role in the education sector by ‘putting in place a secondary education system, entirely funded by the Spanish government, within refugee sites’ (UNHCR 2006b). While it is unclear how long such a project might take to be implemented, the need is considerably clearer.

Beyond primary and secondary schooling, a wide range of national centres also offer professional training to young and adult refugees in the camps, including Gazwane (near Rabouni) which mainly provides computer, vocational and technical training courses; a nursing college; and a number of Women’s Schools and Centres which have been funded by international donors including UNHCR but also the Euskadi (Basque Country) and

**Table 2. Total camp population distributed by age group**

Age group	Percentage (%) of total camp population
0–4	19
5–17	37
18–59	31
60+	13

Source: UNHCR 2004b

other regional Spanish governments. The 27 February National Women’s School remains the largest of these centres, with boarding possibilities for women from all camps to be trained in subjects such as computing, driving, weaving, and languages (in association with the Italian NGO, CRIC). (An additional initiative – to establish a ‘desert university’ – is presented in Section 4 below.)

The successful development of these educational structures in the camps has frequently been heralded by external observers, supported by claims made by the Polisario/SADR, *solidarios* and even WFP that ‘school attendance level is almost 100 percent among refugee children’ (WFP 2004: 6). The Sahrawi’s commitment to education and declarations regarding school attendance and literacy levels are amongst the key features underpinning representations of the ‘success’ of the Sahrawi camps.

Nonetheless, Table 3 indicates the percentage and number of children who were and were not enrolled in camp-based schools (excluding 27 February Camp) according to UNHCR statistics for 2003. This set of data, which is not referred to in mainstream NGO or policy reports on the camps, reveals an alarming trend which directly refutes commonly made claims that the camps have ‘the highest literacy rates in Africa’ (Mundy 2007: 287). Indeed, the latest UNHCR-WFP Joint Assessment Mission to the camps (September 2009) recognised that overall ‘attendance is far below the official enrolment data, reflecting seasonal illness and travel patterns’ (WFP 2009–2010: 6).

**Table 3. Percentage and number of children enrolled and not enrolled in each main camp’s schools, not including 27 February Refugee Camp**

Camp	Total camp population	% population aged 5–17 enrolled in school	% population aged 5–17 NOT enrolled in school	No. children aged 5–17 NOT enrolled in schools
Smara	39,466	57.6%	42.4%	6,210
Dakhla	38,180	43.3%	56.7%	8,030
Aaiun	36,675	60.1%	39.9%	5,440
Ausserd	32,624	61.2%	38.8%	4,690
TOTAL	146,925	Average 55.5%	Average 44.5%	24,370

Source: Latest available data, derived from UNHCR 2004a.

Despite noting a discrepancy between officially reported literacy levels and school enrolment rates and their observations, in 2009 the Joint Mission stated that it had ‘found no gender gap in either enrolment or attendance in primary schools, largely because the Western Saharan refugees place a high value on education and because of the strong role played by women in their society’ (WFP 2009–2010: 6). This assertion, equally, can be challenged through reference to qualitative research conducted in the camps. Indeed, while the UNHCR figures above fail to document the reality of gender disparities in school attendance, lower female enrolment rates had been earlier identified by the WFP, which, in 2004 stated that it is ‘only’ at the upper primary level that ‘household chores and lack of women’s sanitary materials compel older girls to drop out or to attend school irregularly’ (WFP 2004: 6–7). However, observations and interviews completed in the camps between 2001 and 2008 indicate that Sahrawi refugee girls are withdrawn from school at a considerably earlier age than boys; eldest daughters appear to be the most readily identifiable group of children and youth who have been withdrawn to help their mothers with younger siblings, household tasks, and looking after infirm relatives (Fiddian 2002; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a; see Box 2).

Overall, a distinct failure exists in the Sahrawi refugee camps to document and examine the reasons behind girls’ early withdrawal from school, despite this being a broader trend throughout refugee and non-refugee contexts. This failure is in line with the fact that few NGO projects or academic studies have to date documented or addressed girl-children’s experiences of growing up in the Sahrawi refugee camps.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, while the UNHCR Refugee Women and Gender Equality Unit reiterates ‘the idea that empowerment must include women and men, girls and boys’ and states that this idea ‘upholds the principles of non-discrimination and equality embodied in the UNHCR Mission Statement (1998)’ (2001: 30), girls are entirely absent from the Unit’s 2001 account of the NUSW’s ‘good practice in gender mainstreaming’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010d).

More generally, while there are numerous projects ‘for children’ in the Sahrawi camps, none of those currently established in 27 February Refugee Camp, for instance, recognise the specific needs and experiences of girls. One result of this gender-blind approach to childhood in the Sahrawi refugee camps is that, although a number of ‘women’s spaces’ exist in the 27 February camp, and boys and young men have access to ‘public areas,’ including a space immediately outside of the camp’s administrative precinct where they regularly play football, there is a distinct absence of facilities, services or spaces for girls outside of their *khiyām* (tents).

Given UNHCR’s broader recognition that refugee girls tend to be withdrawn from school earlier than boys, the UN agency formally documents the number of schools which have ‘structured girl retention initiatives’ and the number which require such programmes. By the end of 2003, UNHCR recognised that no schools in Aaiun camp had such initiatives, and that between 79% and 82% of schools in Ausserd, Smara and Dakhla *required* these (2004a: 12). Following the destruction of the 9th June School in 2006, the camps have experienced a dramatic decrease in the number of secondary level school places available,

## **Box 2. Spaces for Sahrawi girls and young women in the 27 February Refugee Camp**

*I dropped out [of school] because my mother needed me. She has children and there is no-one to help her. Since I returned to the house, I have taken on my mother's work, whether she is here or not. I help the children to bathe, I take care of the sheep, I fold the blankets, clean the house, go to the administration, and bring things that are needed for the house, such as gas, and other household items.*  
Young woman

*Girls also have problems pursuing their education. This depends on the family. Some of the families do not like to see their girls go abroad. Some prefer that the boys study more than the girls.*  
14-year-old girl

*Life is very difficult in the camps, and girls have very limited places to meet or play. We meet with each other in our homes, in my room for example, and discuss school, the future, and politics.*  
17-year-old girl

*We need programs that provide skills for girls and enable them to remain near their families.*  
54-year-old woman

Sources: SARC interviews

and female enrolment rates across the camps will inevitably have suffered further. A proactive assessment of girls' and young women's needs and priorities in the camps, in addition to a consideration of parents' reasons for withdrawing their daughters from school, are thus urgently needed to ensure the successful development and implementation of retention initiatives in line with international protection standards and frameworks.

### **Spaces for youth participation**

Re-evaluating conditions in the camps in order to tackle decreasing school enrolment rates and the withdrawal of girls from school must also be paralleled by the development of initiatives to maximise the active contribution of educated and trained refugee youth in the camps. In contrast with the conclusions reached by the 2009 ECHO evaluation mission, which identifies a 'shortage of experienced human resources' in the camps, and proposes that more training sessions and capacity building are necessary to improve local actors' participation in the planning and implementation of programmes (Hidalgo et al. 2009: 10), it can rather be argued that there is in fact an excess of 'experienced human resources' in the camps. These include highly qualified and trained Sahrawi youth who

have completed tertiary studies outside of the camps, in addition to those who have undertaken vocational training in the camp-based centres referred to above. Rather than focusing on ‘training sessions’ and ‘capacity building’ in the camps, as suggested by the ECHO evaluation mission, youth *retention* initiatives are increasingly necessary to ensure that educated refugees are able to remain in the camps to facilitate a degree of ‘self-sufficiency’, instead of leaving in search of employment in Spain as has increasingly taken place since the mid-2000s (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b).<sup>23</sup>

Although the Polisario/SADR claims that the camps are entirely dependent upon externally provided aid as there are ‘no economic activities [in the camps] and unemployment is 100%’ (SADR 2007),<sup>24</sup> a small market economy emerged for the first time in the camps following the 1991 ceasefire. At that time, Sahrawi men were gradually returning from the military front and Spain started to pay some of its former colonial employees a pension. With the introduction of a cash economy, those who could afford to do so supplemented their food rations with products purchased in the camps. The new circulation of money also affected NGO–refugee relationships, with NGOs running projects in the camps having to consider for the first time whether to pay their Sahrawi employees there (Abjean 2003: 96–7). The creation of paid employment has led to significant changes in the formerly unpaid social systems and networks which had initially been established and managed by the Polisario/SADR without external intervention.

Clear socio-economic differentiation in the camps has thus intensified and broadened since the early 1990s, with male and female refugees currently engaging in (and competing for) a wide range of activities, jobs and tasks, including work associated with Polisario/SADR Ministries and numerous NGOs running projects in the camps. Such projects include hammams, ‘internet-teas’, hairdressers’ and taxi services run with externally-provided micro-credits (Elizondo et al. 2008).

Most ‘local’ positions in medical and educational institutions as well as in other areas of the Polisario/SADR’s administration are held by young men and women who have studied outside of the camps, and who are engaged in the highly visible camp phenomenon of *pluriempleo*. This is the Spanish term used in the camps to refer to individuals who are concurrently employed by several NGOs and/or Polisario/SADR agencies. Typically, individuals associated with the Polisario/SADR tend to be employed simultaneously by projects funded by external investors. These individuals accumulate considerable financial and social capital in the process, while socio-economic differentiation continues to increase and overall unemployment remains high in the camps. Although female graduates tend to remain closer to their family, and thereby typically continue to live and work in the camps, the system of *pluriempleo* in turn lays, in at least two ways, the foundation for primarily male refugees to emigrate to Spain (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a).

Firstly, connections with Spanish individuals and organisations enable multiply-employed refugees to obtain invitation letters and financial sponsorship, which thus facilitate their being granted a Spanish visa to leave the camps, at which point they leave not one, but



two or three jobs upon their departure. This is recognised by many Sahrawi refugees themselves as a key phenomenon affecting the continuity of projects in the camps, and which, paradoxically, means that access to tertiary education in this context leads to an increased dependence upon European humanitarians, rather than an increase in 'self-sufficiency' as had previously been assumed (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b). This dynamic is particularly significant in camp-based medical institutions, which have, until recently, primarily been run by Sahrawi doctors and nurses who trained in Cuba throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. While family ties and a commitment to the notion of self-sufficiency had initially encouraged large proportions of these graduates to remain in the camps,<sup>25</sup> since the mid-2000s in particular, many of these young men (and some women) leave the camps' hospitals and numerous medical units to work in Spain, where their Cuban medical degrees are readily accepted with few bureaucratic complications and where no language barriers exist. The decreasing number of Sahrawi medical practitioners in the camps is in turn paralleled by an intensified reliance upon Spanish medical commissions, which are increasingly needed to attend to the refugee population.<sup>26</sup>

A second major impact of the system of *pluriempleo* in a broader context of high unemployment in the camps is that individuals who are neither employed by official Sahrawi organisations nor by NGO projects find that they are unable to improve their families' living conditions, leading many of them to emigrate in order to send remittances from Spain (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). Indeed, in 2006, a survey reportedly conducted amongst 540 Sahrawi refugees aged between 17 and 35 in the camps by a locally-produced Sahrawi magazine called *Futuro Saharawi* ('Sahrawi Future'), equally concluded that 87% interviewees wished to obtain a visa to work outside of the camps (*Futuro Saharawi* 2006). While no information is available regarding the methodology used in this survey, and therefore the reliability of the data is somewhat uncertain, the fact that such a survey was reportedly carried out, and that the magazine has included a special report on this matter, suggests the importance which is given to this issue by much of the refugee camp community. Far from requiring more 'training initiatives' and 'capacity building,' a detailed assessment of youth's needs and priorities in the camps could potentially facilitate the development of structured initiatives to retain educated and trained youth in the camps (see Box 3).

Such an exercise would also facilitate the identification of which forms of temporary and durable solutions are considered to be desirable by different camp residents. Hence, if self-sufficiency is to be prioritised in a context of continued encampment, as is officially held by the Polisario/SADR, refugees interviewed in the camps, and the ECHO evaluation mission itself (ECHO 2001), retention activities may be preferred over the development of transnational networks and remittance systems which enable certain refugee youth and families to informally obtain access to a durable solution in Spain.

### **Box 3. Identifying youth's priorities**

During focus groups held in the 27 February Camp, participants indicated that their priorities and opinions had never been sought either by UNHCR, European NGOs, the Polisario/SADR, the National Union of Sahrawi Women or the Polisario's Youth Union (UJSARIO). In these group discussions, youth shared a number of precise suggestions which they felt enthusiastic about and believed would improve conditions in the camps.

A key issue emerging amongst youth who had spent a long period of time studying abroad away from their families was the need for workshops or programmes to improve inter-generational communication. Other proposals, many of which could facilitate more fluid communication and interactions with the older generation, included establishing:

- language training courses (especially in Arabic, English and Spanish),
- micro-credits for young men to establish small businesses (to complement the extensive micro-credit programme already available for young women),
- more widely accessible cultural events, and
- the creation of a 'space to speak.'

The vast majority of interviewees agreed that it would be both feasible and desirable for a small group of researchers to visit each household in the small 27 February Camp to identify families' (including youth's) needs and priorities. A quantitatively relevant needs and rights assessment could successfully be piloted in this small camp, and subsequently extended to the larger camps.

Another major concern emerging for young male participants was their perception that their presence is often dismissed as an anomaly (since organisations continue to associate the camps with war-time demographics, during which time men were at the military front and most camp residents were women, children and the elderly), or they are negatively evaluated as potential 'delinquents' and criminals, including by UNHCR (UNHCR 2006b: 4). Hence, ECHO reports increasing rates of school absenteeism and 'vandalism' in the camps (2005: 3), while the 'youth clubs' which have recently been created by UNHCR in Dakhla and Smara are officially described as being designed to tackle 'juvenile delinquency' (UNHCR 2006b: 4), thereby directly associating (male) youth with dangerous or disruptive behaviour in the camps. Rather than being perceived as offering youth an opportunity to participate in the camps' cultural, economic or political life, interviewees indicated that the justification underlying the creation of these centres has often reinforced young men's feelings of displacement and marginalisation from the camps.

Sources: Primary research in 27 February Camp (2002–2008); UNHCR 2006b; ECHO 2005; webpage for the UN's Mission for the Western Sahara ([www.minurso.org](http://www.minurso.org)).

### 3 Invisible agencies and the development of civil society ‘intimate aid’

Despite the Polisario/SADR's claims to administrative and political self-sufficiency, until recently, Sahrawi refugees were entirely dependent upon humanitarian assistance provided by a range of international donors, including the Algerian state (which has granted the Polisario/SADR control of the desert where the camps are based and sends regular supplies of gas and water), ECHO, UNHCR and WFP. In many senses, however, these major international organisations are invisible in the camps, other than through the widespread presence of their logos on everything ranging from tins of sardines, cans of powdered milk, and bottles of shampoo. Challenging the ‘care and maintenance’ programmes which have characterised protracted encampment situations to date (Milner and Loescher 2011: esp. 15, 19), interviewees in the Sahrawi camps typically dismiss organisations like UNHCR, often stating their disappointment and frustration that the UN has been unable and/or unwilling to hold the referendum for self-determination which MINURSO had been mandated to complete in the early 1990s. UNHCR and other UN agencies have also habitually been portrayed as absent, invisible, ineffective and insincere bodies. Indeed, while the UN has established ‘confidence building measures’ (including free telephone calls and ‘family visits’) to facilitate contact and increase ‘confidence’ between Sahrawi families in the refugee camps and those living in the Western Sahara (Benson 2009), there is arguably also an urgent need for measures to be designed to ‘build confidence’ between Sahrawi refugees on the one hand, and UNHCR/MINURSO on the other. Recently implemented measures, including a commitment to a permanent UNHCR presence in the refugee camps in late 2010 (UNHCR 2011) are to be welcomed; these initiatives could be further strengthened by the careful implementation of the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming policy in order to facilitate a more open dialogue with, and higher levels of participation by, different cohorts of refugees in the camps (including, in particular, female and male children and youth).

Despite the fact that most humanitarian aid is quantitatively brought to the camps through these ‘invisible’ agencies’ projects, individuals and families interviewed in the camps repeatedly reiterated their gratitude to and support for other actors implicated in alternative networks active in the camps and beyond. Indeed, WFP notes in a recent report that ‘(t)he resources from UNHCR do not cover all needs: they are complemented by inputs from the Government of Algeria, *solidarity groups*, and a number of NGOs’ (2008: 9, emphasis added). Solidarity groups in this respect refer to the organised mobilisation of members of civil society who define themselves as being ‘in solidarity with’ or ‘friends of’ the Sahrawi people and the Sahrawi cause for self-determination. While multiple solidarity actors are engaged in working to support the camps and ‘the cause’, the largest and most active network is the Spanish solidarity movement.

From the mid-1990s onwards in particular, Western NGO projects as well as individuals and groups visiting the camps for solidarity, academic and journalistic purposes increased to such an extent that the isolated military airport at Tindouf is now one of the airports in Algeria which reportedly receives the largest number of ‘tourists’ per annum. While one could characterise these visits to the camps as part of a broader phenomenon of ‘disaster tourism,’ this is in fact a two-way phenomenon: an ever-increasing number of

#### **Box 4. Spanish solidarity**

Over 300 groups of *Amigos del Pueblo Saharaui* ('Friends of the Sahrawi People') exist throughout Spain, with the *Coordinadora Estatal de Asociaciones Solidarias con el Sahara* (CEAS, 'State Coordinator of Associations in Solidarity with the Sahara') organising the activities of over 200 associations with an active membership of over 14,700 which support the Sahrawi people through humanitarian, development and political means. The *Federación Estatal de Instituciones Solidarias con el Pueblo Saharaui* (FEDISSAH) is a federation of Spanish state institutions which are 'in solidarity' with the Sahrawi people – the second state conference of institutions 'twinned' with the Sahrawi camps and in solidarity with the Sahrawi people was attended by over 140 Spanish state institutions including municipal and city councils.

Solidary organisations and groups convene and supervise the following activities:

- awareness-raising projects in Spain,
- humanitarian work (especially collecting and sending food aid to the camps),
- designing and funding health and educational projects for the camps, and
- helping to coordinate the annual Holidays in Peace programme.

The annual Holidays in Peace project (*Vacaciones en Paz*) currently transports up to 10,000 Sahrawi children aged between 8 and 12 to Spain during the summer months, thereby allowing them to avoid the hottest periods in the camps. The connections which are built between Sahrawi and Spanish host-families during these two-monthly visits are perceived by camp residents as being essential for their short-term and longer-term prospects, allowing children to benefit directly during the summer itself and to return to the camps bearing gifts, money, medical supplies and food for their immediate and extended families.

Sources: Crivello, Fiddian and Chatty 2005; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2009b; Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010.

Sahrawi refugees temporarily leave the camps to participate in 'hosting' programmes, for educational or employment purposes, or for medical treatment. These movements in people have resulted in material goods arriving both *en masse* and piece-meal to the camps, either through major collective 'solidarity' caravans of food, clothes, medicine and toys, or individual Sahrawi children's suitcases packed with 'presents' from Spanish families which host them through the annual Holidays in Peace programme.

In addition to scheduled flights transporting hundreds of individuals and groups to the camps each month, charter planes are organised to allow Spanish host families to visit 'their' children in the camps at least twice a year, with several thousand Spaniards arriving *en masse* during the Spanish Easter and Christmas vacations. During these visits, Spanish visitors bring commodities and cash to 'their' Sahrawi families, in addition to having the

opportunity to see living conditions *in situ*. The material significance of such connections should not be understated: WFP identifies ‘the very vulnerable households’ as those which ‘had not built any contacts with the civil societies of Spain and of other countries that provide support to refugee *families*’ (2008: 3, emphasis added).

It is this palpable connection and physical proximity to the people who provide them with much needed material and financial assistance, alongside social capital, which leads many Sahrawi families to recognise the significance of the solidarity networks, in contrast with the less visible, and more taken-for-granted humanitarian projects run by UN agencies. We could conceptualise this as a perceived distinction between invisible and anonymous ‘official aid’ and hyper-visible and personally granted ‘intimate aid.’<sup>27</sup>

As recognised by WFP, however, while many households are ‘fortunate enough to have established contacts with sponsor families from Spain or other countries [and] receive support in the form of gifts or cash... this support is not regular’ (WFP 2009–2010: 4), ‘reliable’ or necessarily ‘sustainable’ (UNHCR/WFP 2007: 1). Given its unofficial nature, the extent and nature of support offered through this system of ‘intimate aid’ is currently unknown, and requires further examination.<sup>28</sup>

A selection of potential dangers characterise this family-based humanitarian system, precisely due to the power imbalances which exist between Spanish ‘friends’ and Sahrawi ‘recipients.’ For instance, a range of socio-political and religious conditionalities have in the past been imposed by members of Spanish civil society upon Sahrawi ‘beneficiaries,’ with some ‘Spanish friends’ threatening to dismantle informal humanitarian channels if specific Spanish priorities are not met (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010d). Furthermore, while certain Sahrawi refugees families may indeed face ‘extreme vulnerability’ by virtue of not having children aged between 8 and 12 who can participate in this summer exchange programme (Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010), the potential vulnerability of children who are participating in these hosting programmes has yet to be recognised and adequately addressed. Hence, an area which requires urgent attention surrounds the lack of established guidelines to screen potential Spanish host-families: one Spanish coordinator of the Holidays in Peace programme interviewed by Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh in 2005 ‘insisted that anyone who volunteered to host a child for two months must be a good-natured person,’ leading the authors to strongly recommend that a ‘more rigorous background check of all household members be put into place in order to ensure that the [Sahrawi] children will be housed in a safe environment [in Spain], and that their mental, physical and emotional well-being will be guaranteed’ (ibid.: 113).

## 4 Alternative solutions and protection concerns

The Polisario and the Algerian government systematically stress that neither local integration nor resettlement are considered to be acceptable or viable solutions to the protracted refugee situation (see Brigety 2010), highlighting the need for a political solution to be sought to this political conflict. However, the political impasse between the Moroccan, Algerian and Polisario/SADR parties, and the lack of political will amongst international actors, renders repatriation to the Western Sahara unlikely in the foreseeable future. In their latest joint assessment of the protracted Sahrawi relief and recovery operation, UNHCR/WFP noted that ‘the most likely scenario’ in this protracted conflict is that ‘of a continuing stalemate in the political process with the refugees remaining in exile, dependent on humanitarian aid until a durable solution to the conflict is found’ (2009: 6; also UNHCR 2011: 134).

Despite the difficulty of securing any of the traditional durable solutions in the context of UNHCR’s second oldest refugee caseload, a range of alternative solutions have been identified by the Polisario/SADR, Sahrawi refugees and Sahrawi families, as well as by a variety of state and non-state actors, including in particular: the strengthening of child- and youth-centred transnational networks; distancing from the Algerian-based refugee camps; and the proposed relocation of the camps’ population and administration to Tifariti (Western Sahara). Although these alternative solutions challenge the status quo, and could appear to embody UNHCR’s new preferred ‘solutions-oriented’ approach (Milner and Loescher 2011: 19), the viability and potential ramifications of these individual, family and collective alternative solutions remain unaddressed by policy makers and require urgent attention.

### **Transnational networks**

As indicated earlier, a range of transnational networks have been created and maintained in this protracted refugee context, including the migration of educated refugee youth to Spain who then send remittances to family members in the camps, but also the hosting programme which allows up to 10,000 Sahrawi children to spend two months a year in Spain. This latter network is specifically identified by UNHCR/WFP as a family-centred ‘coping strategy’ (2007: 8), and often lays the foundations for longer-term fostering agreements between Spanish and Sahrawi families (Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010d). These fostering arrangements may, in turn, facilitate the provision of support to the fostered child and her/his family in the camps, and simultaneously lay the foundations for continued residence in Spain. However, in addition to concerns regarding the safety and well-being of children during the summer hosting programme (see above), such longer-term fostering arrangements have become increasingly controversial and have been actively contested in both the Spanish and Sahrawi socio-political and legal arenas throughout the 2000s (ibid.). For instance, although the Sahrawi fostering agreements stipulate that Spanish host families will be granted temporary custody and guardianship of the child on the understanding that the child will be returned to her/his birth family at the Sahrawi family’s request (RASD 2000), a number of high-profile conflicts have arisen when Spanish host families have submitted to the Spanish law courts that it is in the refugee child’s ‘best interests’ to remain in Spain rather than return to live with their families in the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010d). On a number of these occasions, certain Spanish civil society networks have

threatened to withhold aid to the camps unless the child in question has been allowed to stay in Spain, against the Sahrawi family's wishes (ibid.). The implications of such legal challenges include a reduction in the number of children (especially girls) being allowed to participate in the summer hosting programme, and increased tensions between Spanish and Sahrawi families and broader communities. A careful analysis is therefore required to establish the potential short-, medium- and longer-term benefits and repercussions of transnational networks which revolve around Sahrawi refugee children and youth.

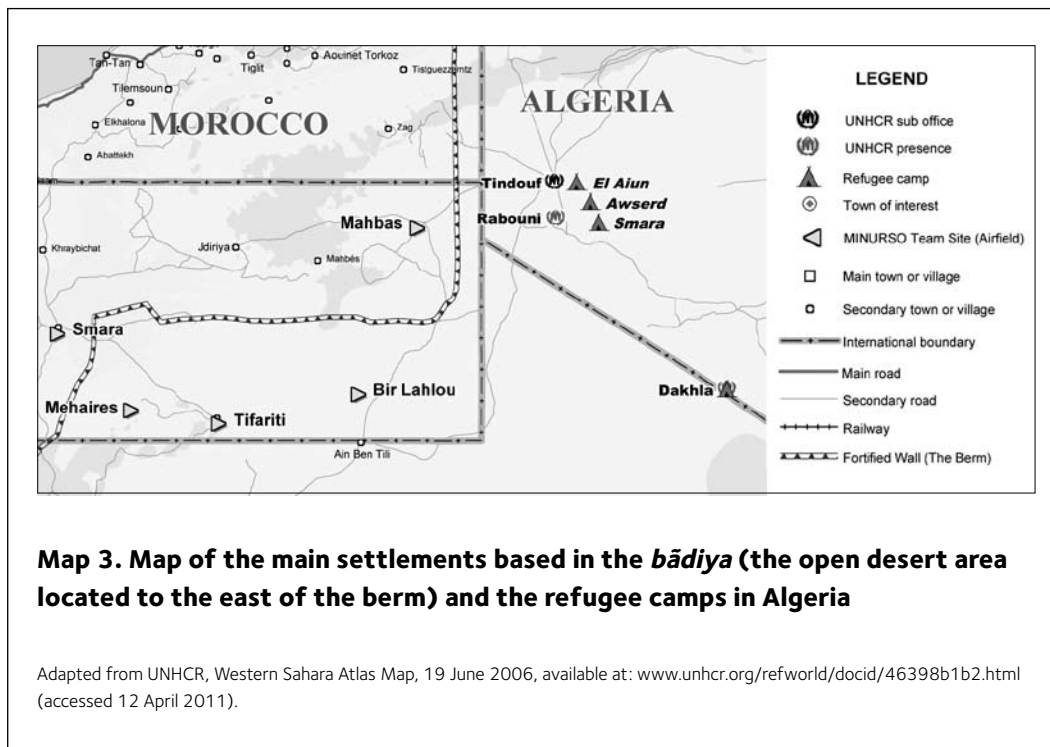
### **Distance, independence and self-settlement in the *bādiya***

Increasing numbers of Sahrawi families are also disengaging from the politico-administrative and service core of the refugee camps by pitching their tents on the outskirts of the camps in order to maximise their 'independence' from the Polisario and international agencies. Interviews in the 27 February Camp between 2001 and 2008 suggest that families are increasingly seeking to maintain a distance from other tents and hence secure a greater degree of privacy, but also indicate a sense of not 'needing' or 'wanting' to access the projects and services run from the Camp's Women's School. Further, interviewees have asserted that, although permission must officially be granted in order to establish a new tent in the Camp, they consider that the Polisario/SADR administration can no longer decide where people should or should not live.

In other cases, individuals and families have left the refugee camps permanently or semi-permanently, preferring to live in the *bādiya* (the open desert of the easternmost region of the Western Sahara) which, again, allows for greater independence from the politico-administrative core.<sup>29</sup> Whilst often sending children and youth to live with camp-based relatives to study in primary, secondary and vocational educational institutions, and returning to the camps to access medical services and other forms of humanitarian assistance (including food aid), it is estimated that over 20,000 Sahrawi refugees reside in the *bādiya*.

### **Relocating to Tifariti: refugees, IDPs or SADR citizens?**

Paralleling the increasing trend for families to move from, or between, the refugee camps to the *bādiya*, the Polisario/SADR has itself also proposed to relocate part of the camps' population and the camps' administration to Tifariti, a small settlement within the easternmost area of the internationally-recognised boundaries of the Western Sahara (see Map 3). The area to the east of the berm constructed by the Moroccan government in the 1980s is under Polisario/SADR control, and is informally referred to by Sahrawi and pro-Polisario supporters as 'the liberated territories,' although this terminology is not used by UNHCR or other UN agencies. By the end of the 1990s, and in anticipation of MINURSO holding the referendum for self-determination according to its mandate, hospitals, schools and wells had already been established around Tifariti to temporarily support Sahrawi refugees transiting the area during the process of mass repatriation to the Western Sahara. However, given the failure to hold the referendum and to achieve a political solution to this conflict, from the mid-2000s Tifariti has increasingly been identified as an alternative location for the camps and their population, rather than as a temporary transit point.



Indeed, in addition to managing the well-established spaces currently known as ‘the Sahrawi refugee camps,’ the Polisario/SADR has repeatedly asserted its ‘national’ ‘authority’ or ‘sovereignty’ 280km to the southwest of the camps, proclaiming that the settlement of Tifariti will be the SADR’s new ‘capital’ (see SPS 2005; Cembrero 2008). Tifariti will reportedly be the new base for the existing SADR National Council and Parliament, and an expansion of projects and infrastructure supported by major foreign investment explicitly aims to encourage the relocation of current camp residents from Algeria to the Polisario-controlled area of the Western Sahara (ibid.). In the 2000s, key donors including members of Spanish civil society and the South African government have substantially increased the number of projects sponsored in the eastern part of the disputed territory of the Western Sahara. For instance, South Africa has recently funded de-mining campaigns in the Western Sahara<sup>30</sup> and has established leisure/sports programmes for Sahrawi youth in the vicinity of Tifariti.<sup>31</sup> Alongside the Spanish State Coordinator of Associations in Solidarity with the Sahara (CEAS) and partner universities from across Spain, Algeria and Cuba, South Africa is also reportedly supporting an international campaign to establish a Sahrawi University in Tifariti. These projects reflect the identification of this area as an alternative to the refugee camps in Algeria.

The proposed relocation of the SADR’s ‘capital’ and camp population on the one hand, and large-scale investment and infrastructural development inside of the internationally recognised boundaries of this non-self-governing territory on the other, introduces particular challenges and opportunities for Sahrawi refugees, the Polisario/SADR and policy makers alike. Whilst the provision of services and the development of politico-



administrative Sahrawi structures within the Western Sahara is heralded by international civil society supporters of the Polisario/SADR as demonstrating ‘Sahrawi sovereignty’ over the territory, it is unclear how international state and non-state actors might respond to the large-scale permanent relocation of Sahrawi refugees to Tifariti. For instance, during celebrations organised by the Polisario/SADR in and around Tifariti in the 2000s, the Moroccan government has repeatedly denounced large scale concentrations of Sahrawi refugees and international supporters close to the berm as a ‘provocation’, with MINURSO labelling the presence of Sahrawi armed forces in the area as being in breach of the ceasefire agreements. Given the potential for this relocation to further augment tensions with Morocco, and both the logistical and legal implications of moving the camps into the Western Sahara, it is also unclear how such a change might impact upon the longer-term delivery of aid by WFP, UNHCR and ECHO to Sahrawi individuals and families who would no longer legally be defined as ‘refugees’: while the Sahrawi are currently recognised by UNHCR as mandate refugees since they are outside of the Western Sahara, the settlement of families in the *bādiya* and the proposed mass relocation of the Sahrawi camp population to Tifariti would both, in effect, render the Sahrawi ‘internally displaced.’

Alternatively, the move to Tifariti could ostensibly be considered to be a form of ‘voluntary repatriation’ to the Western Sahara, with the Polisario/SADR effectively administering part of this non-self-governing territory and its internally-displaced population. Whether such an interpretation would facilitate or limit the likelihood of a political solution to the conflict over the entire territory has yet to be explored. However, since the SADR is a full member of the African Union and has recently signed the Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, it remains to be seen whether the SADR might attempt to utilise this Convention to invoke the intervention of the African Union to offer assistance and protection, including the identification and implementation of a durable solution to this situation of protracted displacement. This matter therefore requires serious academic and policy analysis.

In all of these scenarios, key protection concerns are identifiable for displaced Sahrawi individuals and families developing alternative solutions in Spain, on the outskirts of the existing refugee camps in Algeria, or in the *bādiya* within the borders of the Western Sahara. However, the question of which state, quasi-state and non-state actors are responsible for providing and monitoring the provision of meaningful protection in these diverse geopolitical contexts remains unclear. Indeed, the proposed relocation of the camp’s politico-administrative structure and population from Algerian territory to the easternmost area of the Western Sahara may be interpreted as signalling the Algerian government’s increasing reluctance to be identified by UN agencies, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as responsible under existing international law for protecting the rights of Sahrawi refugees residing on its territory.<sup>32</sup> Rather than further ‘normalising’ the status quo through assertions that continued encampment is ‘the most likely scenario’ for the foreseeable future, it is essential for academic and policy makers alike to carefully assess precisely where, and with whose protection and assistance, Sahrawi individuals and families will be located in the medium- to long-term.

## Conclusions and recommendations

As the Sahrawi refugee camps are now more accessible to policy makers and academic researchers than before, there is an urgent need for the Polisario/SADR and international agencies alike to undertake a detailed rights- and needs-based assessment of the camps' population. Such an evaluation, based on both quantitative and qualitative analyses by Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi researchers, would enable actors at all levels to identify, assess and uphold the diverse needs, priorities and rights of girls, boys, youth, adult women and men, and the elderly and the disabled, in line with relevant international standards. Drawing on such research will also highlight that idealised depictions of life in the Sahrawi refugee camps potentially risk normalising the status quo, thereby hiding the anomalous nature of the Sahrawi's protracted displacement and failing to engage with the political causes, impacts and potential solutions to the conflict.

Despite the difficulties of securing traditional durable solutions for the protracted Sahrawi refugee situation (local integration, repatriation or resettlement in a third country), and in spite of a lack of political will to secure a comprehensive solution to the Western Saharan conflict, a range of alternative solutions have been identified by the Polisario and Sahrawi refugees alike, including:

- a. the development of family- and child-centred transnational networks;
- b. the self-settlement of families in the *bādiya*;
- c. the proposed relocation of part of the camps' population to Tifariti, which is located inside the internationally recognised borders of the Western Sahara.

It is therefore necessary to assess both the viability of these alternative solutions, and the relevant protection concerns which may arise in relation to each proposed or actual coping strategy.

Firstly, given Sahrawi refugees' increased reliance on civil society advocacy networks to sustain child- and family-centred coping strategies, it is essential to question the short-, medium- and long-term implications of Sahrawi refugee families' increasing dependence upon 'intimate aid' provided directly by European families and members of civil society networks.

Secondly, while the Sahrawi are currently recognised by UNHCR as mandate refugees, the settlement of families in the *bādiya* and the relocation of refugees to Tifariti would both, in effect, render the Sahrawi 'internally displaced.' Such a shift would potentially have serious legal and humanitarian impacts which must be considered carefully by all parties involved.

Finally, whether in scenarios of continued encampment in Algeria or in light of the alternative 'popular' solutions outlined above, it is necessary to clarify who is responsible for the legal and relief protection of displaced Sahrawi individuals and families, and to develop accountability mechanisms to monitor the implementation of relevant programmes and projects in these diverse contexts.

In light of the above, concrete recommendations to the key stakeholders include the following:

#### **The Algerian government and Polisario/SADR**

- Despite ambiguities pertaining to the status and international obligations of the Polisario/SADR, both Polisario/SADR and the Algerian government must uphold their international obligations to respect and protect the rights and needs of Sahrawi refugees living under the de facto administration of the Polisario/SADR within the Algerian host state.
- The Polisario/SADR must meet donors' accountability standards, maximising transparency and ensuring that aid is fairly and equitably distributed across the refugee population.
- The Polisario/SADR must assess its approach to self-reliance in the refugee camps, and revise its policies to maximise the meaningful participation of different social groups within the camps.

#### **UNHCR**

- In light of internal inconsistencies in the figures published in UNHCR reports, UNHCR must endeavour to utilise consistent figures across all of its sections and units. This is particularly significant given the extent to which these figures are adopted for planning purposes by UN and other international agencies.
- While 'confidence building measures' (including free telephone calls and 'family visits') have been established by the UN to facilitate contact and increase 'confidence' between Sahrawi families in the refugee camps and those living in the Western Sahara, an increased UNHCR presence in the camps should equally be paralleled by the creation of measures to strengthen Sahrawi refugees' confidence in UNHCR.
- Through its commitment to Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming, UNHCR must ensure that spaces for dialogue, participation and policy development are created for girls and boys, female and male youth, and the elderly and disabled in the camps.
- A proactive assessment of girls' and young women's needs and priorities must be developed to ensure the successful development and implementation of structured girl retention initiatives in line with international protection standards and frameworks.
- The development of structured *youth* retention initiatives could potentially maximise the meaningful contributions of educated and trained youth in the camps. Such initiatives would create an active space for youth participation in socio-economic life in the camps, challenging mainstream depictions of (male) refugee youth as potential delinquents and vandals.

#### **Civil society networks and NGOs**

- Alongside other interested partners, NGOs and civil society networks must address the nature and implications of the phenomenon of *pluriempleo*, whereby individuals are concurrently employed by several NGOs and/or Polisario/SADR agencies.
- Civil society networks must assess the nature and mid- to long-term implications of the diverse programmes run 'in solidarity' with Sahrawi refugees.
- The protection of Sahrawi refugee children participating in the Holidays in Peace scheme must be prioritised, with careful screening of potential host or foster-families.

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# Endnotes

1. UNHCR defines protracted refugee situations as those in which refugees have remained in exile 'for five years or more after their initial displacement, without immediate prospects for implementation of durable solutions' (UNHCR 2009a, quoted in Milner and Loescher 2011: 3).
2. See Milner and Loescher (2011) regarding the historical primacy of care-and-maintenance approaches to protracted refugee situations.
3. Given the extensive overlap of members of the Polisario Front and the representatives of the SADR (e.g. Mohamed Abdelaziz is both the Secretary-General of the Polisario and the President of the SADR), the report shall henceforth refer to 'the Polisario/SADR.'
4. It is beyond the scope of this Policy Briefing to address or evaluate the various plans to settle the conflict which have been proposed by the UN between the 1980s and the present date. For an overview of the diverse political plans presented since the 1980s, and the legal debates surrounding the proposed solutions to the conflict, see Darbouche and Zoubir (2008), and Zunes and Mundy (2010).
5. On conditions in the Western Sahara, see Shelley (2004), Stephan and Mundy (2006), Human Rights Watch (2010), and Amnesty International (2010). Also, see <http://minurso.unmissions.org/>.
6. Also see [www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minurso/background.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minurso/background.shtml) for an overview of the long-standing contestation of the registration process and the means of confirming the eligibility of voters.
7. Mauritania's precarious socio-economic situation has led many Hassaniya-speaking Mauritians (who may, or may not refer to themselves as 'Sahrawis') (in particular men) to work and live in the refugee camps. The existence of the trade networks between the camps and Mauritania has been documented (e.g. Cozza 2004).
8. The SADR ratified the AU Convention on Constitutive Act of the AU on 27 December 2000. The Convention was adopted on 11 July 2000 and entered into force on 26 May 2001. Accessed at [www.achpr.org/english/ratifications/ratification\\_constitutive%20act.pdf](http://www.achpr.org/english/ratifications/ratification_constitutive%20act.pdf) on 13 March 2009.
9. See [www.achpr.org](http://www.achpr.org) and AU EXCOM (2010).
10. See [www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/list/Convention%20on%20IDPs%20-%20displaced.pdf](http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/list/Convention%20on%20IDPs%20-%20displaced.pdf).
11. Paralleling the inconsistencies outlined below, there is also a lack of clarity pertaining to the planning figures used in official UNHCR reports and statistical overviews, and whether these figures purport to reflect the entire camp population or solely the 'vulnerable' proportion of the population.
12. Internal inconsistencies are not unique to figures pertaining to the Sahrawi context, but prevail across contexts of protracted displacement.
13. In 2008 a joint WFP/Médicos del Mundo nutrition survey indicated that an estimated 31–32% of children under the age of five were identified as suffering from chronic malnutrition, resulting in stunting; that 62% of children aged 6–59 months were anaemic; and that 54% of non-pregnant women, and 66% of pregnant women were anaemic.
14. See <http://usunrome.usmission.gov/mission/resources/reports/files/Algeria.htm>.
15. Such studies are typically sympathetic to the Polisario's claims over the Western Sahara, and to the Sahrawi struggle for self-determination.
16. Critiques of this representation of the NUSW as an 'ideal partner,' and of the camps as spaces of female empowerment are presented in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010a and 2010c).
17. More recent accounts include López Belloso and Mendia Azkue (2009), and WFP (2009–2010).
18. The Sahrawi Red Crescent collects and distributes World Food Programme aid from Rabouni's central warehouses, with camp-based assistants (typically women) at the local neighbourhood level being in charge of allocating food rations to each household's head (also women).
19. Exceptions include Cuban doctors who spend up to two years completing internationalist placements in the camps (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010b and 2011b), American evangelists who teach English in the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011a), and a small number of academic researchers who completed longer-term fieldwork in the 2000s.

20. The SARC project was led by Dawn Chatty. As part of this investigation into the experiences of Sahrawi refugee children and youth, interviews were conducted by local Sahrawi teams in the refugee camps between 2002 and 2003, and by Gina Crivello and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh in Spain in 2005.
21. See Fiddian 2002; Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2009b, 2010b.
22. The major exceptions are Chatty (2010); Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello (2010); Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010); and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2009a, 2009b, 2010c, 2010d).
23. This is also recognised in passing in UNHCR/WFP (2007: 12).
24. Document on file with author; author's translation.
25. No official statistics are available regarding the number or proportion of graduates emigrating from the camps. This conclusion is based on observations of medical institutions in the camps between 2002 and 2008, in addition to interviews with Cuban-educated graduates and Spanish medical humanitarian actors in Cuba, Spain and in the camps throughout this period (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011b). As noted by Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Crivello, however, the desire to leave the camps 'should not be considered a given,' as supported by interviews with youth in the camps (2010: 75–76).
26. Author's interview with Spanish doctor, 27 February Refugee Camp, March 2007; also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011b).
27. Following Betteridge's work on formal and personal gift exchange in Iran (1985).
28. For instance, it would be essential to examine how such a programme upholds or challenges the general humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality of aid.
29. While Sahrawi individuals and families may feel more 'independent' by virtue of living outside of the camps, this could equally raise the question of whether the Polisario continues to feel the same sense of responsibility toward them. As noted below, the Polisario is increasingly asserting its 'national' 'authority' or 'sovereignty' over the *bādiya* (SPS 2005; Cembrero 2008).
30. Since Polisario/SADR signed Geneva Call's *Deed of Commitment* to ban the use of landmines (see above), Landmine Action has undertaken surveying and clearance activities with UN support (see [www.genevacall.org/Africa/Western-Sahara/western-sahara.htm](http://www.genevacall.org/Africa/Western-Sahara/western-sahara.htm)).
31. Verbatim proceedings of speech by Ambassador Saley at the Institute of Global Justice, South Africa, 30 May 2007.
32. Since no statement has been issued by the Government of Algeria or by Polisario to this effect, further research is required to explore this proposition.

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