

ENDING REFUGEE WAREHOUSING

ARE THERE BEST PRACTICES?

History of Refugee Management in Africa

The refugee policy in most African countries has evolved over the decades from an open door, laissez faire approach to a policy of control and containment in camps. While responsibility of refugees in these countries lay with the Governments in the 1980's, this was shifted to UNHCR due to lack of funds and resources in dealing with the emergencies arising from civil and political conflict in the region¹. But was intended to be a temporary measure meant to provide life-saving protection and assistance has over the years become the cornerstone of refugee management in the region.

Nature of Camps in Africa

- ◆ Artificial environments where everyone is restricted in their freedom of movement.
- ◆ Overcrowded environments where epidemics such as measles, dysentery, meningitis and cholera have been found to be major killers. -Kakuma Refugee Camp is dealing with a cholera outbreak, 5 already dead.
- ◆ High incidence of nutrition-related diseases such as night blindness, beri-beri, pellagra, and scurvy, caused by the lack of micro-nutrients - vitamins - in the rations supplied;
- ◆ Security and safety problems of the camp environments leading to high incidences of rape and sexual violence particularly for women and girls;
- ◆ Extremely high incidences of domestic violence which is attributed to the idle life that leads to frustration and anger;

- ◆ Ethnic and clan fighting between various groups of refugees and between the refugees and the local people, usually over resources, political issues from countries of origin,

What options therefore?

In response to protracted refugee situations, recent years have seen an increased interest in the scheme of developmental approaches to refugee assistance, first with the Self Reliance Strategy (SRS) and then with the UNHCR's recent Development assistance to Refugees (DAR) initiative, under its Convention Plus Project.

Two countries in Africa who have adopted these strategies with varying results are Uganda and Zambia. The results have been mixed and both countries have to date not managed to totally get rid of camps. Those in settlements with land to till do not have total freedom of movement and have to have passes for movement.

Successes of the Initiatives

- ◆ A majority of refugees in settlements² in Angola became self-sufficient in food and ended their dependence on World Food Programme rations. They were able to grow crops on the 6 and 12 fertile acres provided to them by the local authorities.
- ◆ Marked increase in food production by both refugees and the local host communities. Refugees are able to sell their produce because the local authorities provide them with 30-60 day travel passes. The significance of these refugees'

¹ This happened in Kenya in the early 1990's after the influx of Somali's and Sudanese refugees. In Sudan and Uganda, transfer of responsibility was gradual and for the same reasons of funds and resources.

² Specifically in Mayukwayukwa and Meheba districts of Zambia

contribution to the local community was highlighted by the collapse in food production in western Zambia after the repatriation of 220,000 Angolans in 2002.

Options for Kenya

The Kenya government employs the encampment policy for the management of refugees. Refugees are enclosed in restricted camps where their freedom of movement is curtailed. They wholly depend on food rations and opportunities for self reliance are scarce. The changing trends and shifting priorities at the international level have seen food rations reduced in quantity and quality.

Kenya, unlike Uganda and Zambia has a very low percentage of arable land. Alternative mechanisms need to be applied in order to allow refugees achieve sustainable livelihoods and enjoy their basic freedoms.

Income Generating Projects

Experience from Jesuit Refugee Services, Don bosco, Care among other non governmental organizations extending the financial lending services to refugees in Kenya have indicated that most refugees who access micro-credit lead productive lives and their means of livelihoods are greatly enhanced. The refugees are able to earn stable incomes sufficient to provide for themselves and their families.

Increasing funding and access to IGAs for refugees would empower them and stop their reliance on food aid.

Vocational Training

Funds for education and skills training for refugees need to be increased as this is an important avenue to self-reliance and freedom. The lack of adequate funding has meant that refugees barely go beyond primary school education as opportunities in the camp are limited.

A strategic approach that involves taking a long-term analysis of the skills, knowledge and competences required in the host and country of origin is required. Indeed this would encourage refugees to return home once situations change.

Business Opportunities

The Kenyan Government which employs the encampment policy has failed to recognize the skills and resources of refugees. Mechanisms for registering such refugees who have over the years carried out their businesses while falling outside the tax bracket need to be put in place. Such mechanisms should also recognize small scale businesses and petty traders among the refugees.

Conclusion

The Zambia Initiative and the Ugandan Self-Reliance Strategy exemplify the potential to integrate refugees into national-development plans. These cases highlight the role refugees can play as active agents of development, contributing to the economy and society of the host state.

For countries without land, implementing alternatives to long-term confinement requires that the international community share the burden of hosting refugees more strategically to increase access to basic rights.

The efforts of advocacy organisations in highlighting the practice of long term confinement in restricted camps and detention centres need to be more aggressive and strategic.